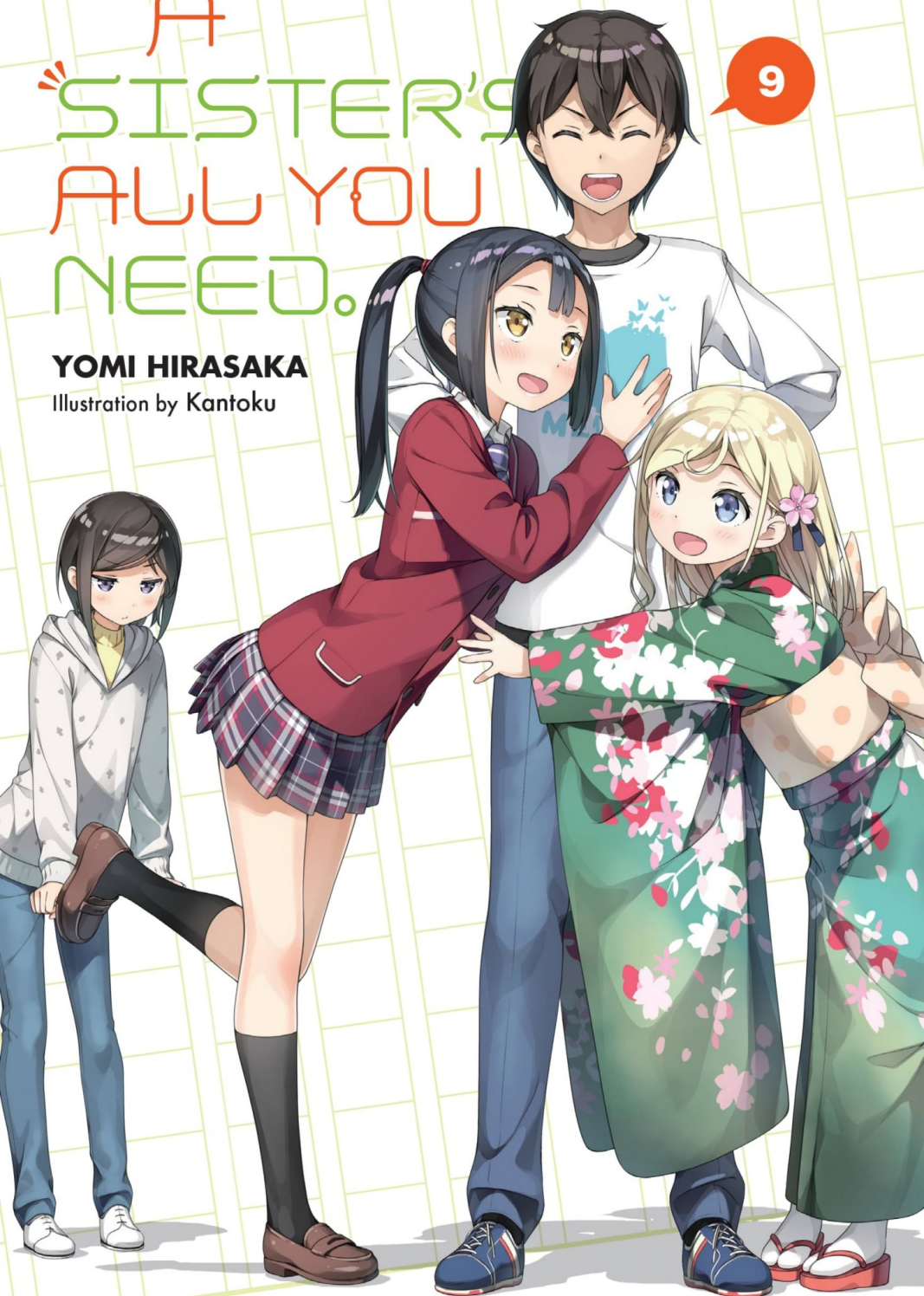


A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku

9





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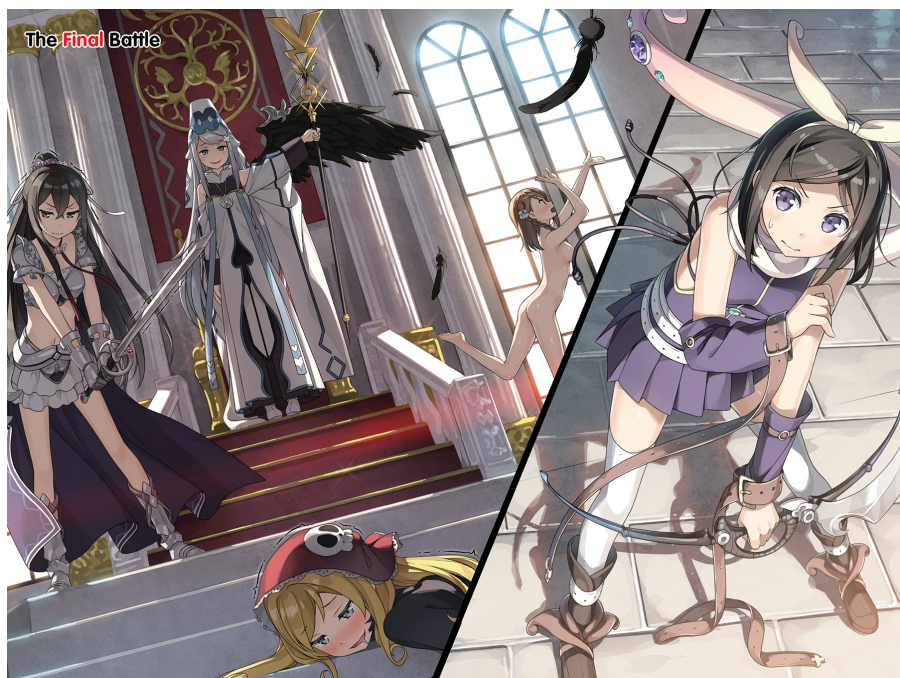
Illustration by Kantoku







The **Angel** Descends **from** Heaven



✧ She's Getting a Rep as an Irresponsible Ditz, but Come to Think of It, She's
Supposed to Be a Tax Accountant



✧ Budding Leaves

✧ The Trials of a College Student Sharing
a Place with Two Creatives

✧ Next Year's Cherry Blossoms

✧ The Hangover

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That It Happens All the Time)

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Colony Drop on the Whole Industry

✧ Congrats

✧ The White Box

✧ Chronica Chronicle—
The Final Chapter:
The Seeds of Explosions





A
SISTER'S
ALL YOU
NEED.

Yomi Hirasaka

illustration by Kantoku

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 9

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 9

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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Illustration by KANTOKU

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Haruto's sister.

She's Getting a Rep as an Irresponsible Ditz, but Come to Think of It, She's *Supposed* to Be a Tax Accountant

It was the end of February when tax accountant Ashley Ono stopped by Itsuki Hashima's apartment, and there was only one reason an accountant would be visiting a freelance writer at that time of year. It was time to file his income taxes.

Itsuki had enlisted her help for the first time last year, which resulted in a much larger refund than when he did them himself. He was hesitant at first, concerned that he'd be exposed to the disgrace of explaining his entire collection of porn games and DVDs again, but he hired her anyway. There was no doubting her talents, after all.

"Thanks for coming today. Um...go easy on me?"

"Hee-hee-hee! Absolutely."

Ashley sweetly smiled at Itsuki as she went inside. Then:

"Oh, it's Ashley, my favorite *massage* fan. Hello!"

The greeting came with a smile but also a hint of venom that only Ashley would detect. She stiffened.

The voice belonged to Chihiro, who was sitting by the low *kotatsu* table. She had a file containing all the relevant receipts and publisher paystubs.

"Eh...heh-heh-heh... Hello there, Chihiro," Ashley said, trying to deflect her own agitation.

"Did you have a *massage* last night, too?"

"Um, yes...kind of..."

Realizing Chihiro wasn't truly smiling at all, Ashley became increasingly uncomfortable, and her eyes began to dart around.

Chihiro had discovered Ashley's vibrator under the TV stand while cleaning her office last week. While attempting to explain it to her, Ashley made a spur-of-the-moment decision and lied, calling it a massager. She had already purchased a new one, so Chihiro took *that* one back home, but...

"...Did you discover the truth, then?"

“.....”

Ashley shivered under the frigid gaze of Chihiro. “...Did you try it?” she asked timidly.

“Of course I didn’t!”

Chihiro blushed in anger and shame, but then her face returned to a blank slate.

“...All things in moderation, including your *massages*, all right?”

“Um, okay...”

She didn’t bother to hide her contempt for Ashley as she broke into a cold sweat.

“What kind of a massage are you talking about, Chihiro?” a curious Itsuki asked.

“I’ve just gotten into massages lately, okay?! Now, Itsuki, let’s get your taxes squared away!”

“Uh, okay.” Itsuki nodded, unsure what to make of his blushing accountant’s rapid change of subject.





Chihiro had already taken to organizing the receipts and paystubs by detailed types, which kept Ashley from making a game out of asking Itsuki to describe his X-rated purchases in detail, so it didn't take long to wrap up the work.

Taking a breather with the bean jam mochi cake and green tea Chihiro provided, Ashley decided to come out with it.

"So that takes care of this tax return...but what are you going to do about next year's?"

"What do you mean?" Itsuki raised an eyebrow.

"The anime based on your work debuts this July, right? If that results in a significant increase in your income, we won't be able to work with a big pile of receipts like this."

"Oh... So what should we do?"

"Most people go with the average taxation."

"Average taxation...? I think I've heard of that."

"It's a system that can really only be used by people with extreme fluctuations in their yearly income, like pro athletes, fishermen, writers, or musicians. You can average out the year's income with that of the past two years to reduce the amount of income tax you pay."

"Uh-huh..."

Ashley smirked at Itsuki's obvious failure to follow her. "Anyway, it's an effective approach to take if you're gonna make a lot more than usual this year."

"Okay, so we'll go with that for next year's income tax?"

"That's what I'm thinking right now...but there's another common tax measure, too."

"Oh?"

"Incorporation... In other words, starting a company."

"Starting a company...?" This seemed to stop Itsuki in his tracks.

"Basically," Ashley flatly explained, "you start a company and treat your royalties and page fees as company revenue. If you're filing as a sole proprietor, then progressive taxation means the more you make, the higher your tax rate, but corporate tax is assigned a flat rate. So once you make over a certain amount, you'll pay a lower tax rate if you post your income as company earnings."

"I see..."

"But if your income falls *below* a certain line—in other words, if your tax rate is below the corporate tax rate—you'll wind up paying more taxes instead. Starting a company requires some paperwork, and

it's not like you can close the firm if your income drops and start it up again once it rises. So starting a company's a smart approach only if you expect to make enough money not just in the coming year, but for at least several years to come, on a regular basis. As a general rule... Well, I'd say the line's at about ten million yen [approximately \$95,000]. If you think you can reliably make at least ten million yen a year, then instead of taking advantage of average taxation for just that year, you'll save money if you incorporate."

"At least ten million a year over the long term..."

Itsuki paused. With the anime being broadcast this year, ten million in income seemed pretty likely. But could he keep making that same amount next year and beyond? That was beyond him to gauge. Of course, if he wanted to be an author on the same level as Nayuta Kani, ten million would *have* to be no sweat for him.

He wanted to shout out "I'll be fine! Let's incorporate right now!" But in this industry, there was no guarantee that good, consistent work would make you rich. Trends come and go, and individual authors go in and out of style. In recent years, the success of an anime wasn't strictly linked to novel sales at all—sometimes a popular anime wouldn't boost the books much, and other times a mediocre one would still be followed by breakout book sales. It was just hard to predict.

"Hmmm..."

Itsuki sat there, troubled, as Ashley calmly continued explaining.

"I know how hard it is for an author to predict his future, so you don't need to give me an answer right now. Let's discuss this again once you have an idea of how many copies of your new volume will get released pre-anime launch—and how many reprints we'll see afterward. Personally, I hope you can become a stable enough seller before *too* long that you'll have no regrets incorporating, but..."

"...All right. I'll give it some careful consideration." Itsuki nodded, resolute, as Ashley gave him a gentle smile.

"Wow, Ashley, I guess you weren't just a day-drinking *massage* aficionado after all," Chihiro offered venomously, and a drop of sweat ran down Ashley's cheek.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Ashley Ono says she prefers men
in her twenties. She's not a fan of older men?



I like to take the leader role, so I'd prefer to have them younger than me. But I'm not totally against older men, either—if I find the right person, I don't think age makes a difference... Huh? Makina? Ha-ha-ha-ha, *forget* it!

QUESTION

Did Ashley have some inspiration for
becoming a tax accountant?



Well, money forms the foundation of modern society, right? Being able to control money as an expert is like having the entire human race at your beck and call...and once I realized that, I just got soooo excited.

Budding Leaves

In early March, a new author was having a meeting with her editor in the Gift Publishing building.

This author was Aoba Kasamatsu, a girl whose book *Memories of the Sky* won a runner-up prize in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest when she was only sixteen. She was in her first year of high school, although it'd be her second year in another month's time. Her editor, meanwhile, was Kirara Yamagata, a twenty-eight-year-old woman with glasses who also worked with Nayuta Kani, GF Bunko's biggest star.

Aoba and Yamagata were staring right at each other, lips pursed. Both of them came across as relatively intense by default, but that was even more obvious now. A heavy sense of doom had settled over the meeting room.

"...I told you, didn't I? These superficial revisions aren't what we need. We should reconsider it at the very core." Yamagata punctuated this with a frustrated sigh. It only made Aoba pout more.

"And I've been asking you *again* and *again*—what, exactly, do you want me to fix? I need something concrete."

The emphasis on *again* made Yamagata sigh anew.

"I told you, it's nothing I can give you a roadmap for and say 'Fix this and this and this.' We need to address the overall 'Nayuta Kani follower' feel that's pervading the entire book—"

"And I'm telling *you*, that doesn't make any sense to me! Besides, if I'm following my *true* emotions the way Nayuta Kani does, then of course it'll feel the same, won't it?!"

True emotions, huh...?

Yamagata bit back the words and let out a deep breath. This was the seventh editorial meeting since Yamagata had taken on Aoba and begun to prepare *Memories of the Sky* for publication. Progress was, shall we say, below expectations.

At GF Bunko, editors generally volunteered to take on the new authors they liked. In Yamagata's case, she'd read the submitted draft of *Memories of the Sky* and enjoyed it enough that she wanted to edit it. There was a Nayuta Kani-style narrative that drew you in, a Nayuta Kani-style intricately woven story, and Nayuta Kani-style vibrant emotions—but in all aspects, it was inferior to its inspiration. Thus,

she figured, she could become Aoba's editor, coach her through revisions, and turn *Memories of the Sky* into a masterpiece even better than *The Silvery Landscape*, Nayuta Kani's debut.

Now she realized reality wasn't so kind. If they took what they had now and released it as *Memories of the Sky*, then—just as contest judges Makina Kaizu and Haruto Fuwa pointed out—people would call it a hackneyed copy of Nayuta Kani. But Aoba couldn't comprehend that. She stubbornly believed that her talents, and her writing, were the equal of her idol. And Yamagata simply lacked the debate skills to logically convince Aoba otherwise.

That was the thing. It was literally impossible to express, in words, exactly *what* made Nayuta Kani a talent. She had a real, indescribable gift—Yamagata couldn't explain in clear, concrete terms how to get close to it or what exactly Aoba was missing. So her revision instructions naturally turned out too vague for Aoba to accept as valid—and they had gone through several cycles of trivial changes in wording and character backgrounds.

"How long do we have to keep wasting time on this BS...?!" Aoba hissed in a low whisper, probably not realizing it.

Her tone of voice betrayed her frustration, as well as her agitation. *Memories of the Sky* was supposed to come out in March—this month, in other words. It was already assigned an illustrator and had its cover art done, but thanks to the revision slowdown, the release had to be delayed. Ui Aioi's *I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World, so I Just Started a Harem* came out in January; Yoshihiro Kiso's *Tsurugi: Sword of Sengoku* (submitted under the title *Sengoku Kenpuden*) launched in February, and both Makoto Yanagase's *The Goddess Must Be Punished! I'll Save the World for You, so Just Show Me Your Ass!* and Tadashi Kamo's *Karuma the Lawyer* (submitted under the title *Illegal Trial*) were set to be released this month. Out of the New Writers Contest winners, only Aoba was still at a stalemate.

Yamagata could sense her agitation. *BS, huh...? Yes... Maybe all this revision work is ultimately pointless. In which case...*

"...Do you want to release it? As is?"

Aoba's eyes widened in shock at the flat offer. "...Can we?"

"If you truly believe this book competes on the same playing field as the work of Ms. Kani, then I think we can release it and let the public decide."

"...!" Aoba seemed daunted for a moment. But she quickly declared, "Of course! I'd love to release this as soon as we can!"

"...All right. I'll begin sending the material to the presses." Yamagata simply nodded without letting her emotions show. Releasing it like this, she had at least half of an idea what the public would think of *Memories of the Sky*—and of its author, Aoba

Kasamatsu. It was a drastic measure to take, but it was the only way she could convince Aoba of reality.

And so *Memories of the Sky* was slated for an April release.

The Trials of a College Student Sharing a Place with Two Creatives

“Hey, I’m back— Oh, not *again*...”

One night in mid-March, Miyako returned to her apartment from her part-time job in the editorial department at GF Bunko, only to sigh once she saw the state of the apartment from the front door. Clothing and underwear were strewn around the hallway, and there were visible puddles on the floor.

Calmly picking up the garments and tossing them into the washer by the bathroom, Miyako took a bath towel and wiped up the corridor.

In the living room, she found Nayuta sprawled out on the floor, entirely naked. She was facedown and soaked from head to toe, water creating a puddle around her.

“Ahhh, Myaaaa, welcome baaack,” she called languidly when she realized Miyako was there.

“Don’t give me that,” retorted Miyako sharply as she turned to her. “How many times do I have to tell you? You have to dry yourself off after you’re done with your bath.”

Nayuta looked up, bleary-eyed and not at all apologetic. “Nyahhh, I’m sorry... I got too hot, and you know...”

“Just dry yourself off. You’re going to catch a cold.” With a sigh, Miyako took a new towel from the bathroom, lifted Nayuta from the floor, and dried off her wet hair and body.

“Nya-ha-ha! You’re tickling me, Myaa.”

“Just hold still a moment, please.”

As Nayuta wriggled around like a cat, and Miyako violently rubbed her body, the older girl had to ask herself, *What am I even doing...?*

Just then...

“I was waiting for you, Myaa!”

The door flew open as Kaiko entered the living room from beyond. She must have been hard at work, because she was wearing a pair of panties as a mask, and deep bags were visible under her eyes through the leg holes.

“Uh... Did you need something else?” a suspicious Miyako asked.

Kaiko nodded intensely. "Yes! I need you to model again."

"Awww..."

Miyako winced. Kaiko was drawing the manga version of Itsuki Hashima's *All About My Little Sister*, but since Miyako had a similar body type to *All About* heroine Ichika Akatsuki, she was frequently enlisted as a model for tricky poses.

"...So what is it this time? Panties? Nude?" Miyako's voice was flat, but she showed no interest in turning down her request.

"Nothing but a bra," Kaiko explained. "Uhhh, your hands are against the wall, and you're pushing your breasts against it while you stick your butt way out."

"...Like this?" Nimble slipping off her clothes and panties, Miyako kept on her bra as she followed Kaiko's instructions.

"Right. Now, please lift up your right leg and hold it straight out."

"Mm, okay."

"Aw, thanks, Myaa! Your body's so limber!"

"Ngh... This—this is kind of tough..." Miyako flashed a strained smile. Since entering college, she hadn't spent nearly as much time exercising. Gym class had become a thing of the past when she started her third year of high school. It was clear to Miyako that she had lost a lot of the flexibility she'd had a few short years ago.

"Just hold it like that, please!" Kaiko hurriedly returned to her room to fetch a marker and some paper. The next moment, she began to sketch.

"Whoa, Myaa, that's pretty gutsy!"

Nayuta walked up to Miyako, eyeing her up and down in an openly lurid fashion. It made Miyako's cheeks burn in shame.

"Hey. Stop staring at me, Nayu!"

"Hyahh, this angle is so incredible. Can I get a photo?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Please don't move, Myaa!"

"Ugh..."

The veins were visible in Kaiko's eyes as she admonished Miyako, who was now starting to tear up. She kept that pose for another five or so minutes, her right leg growing more and more pained.

"Hey, how much longer do you need? This pose is really tiring me out...not to mention embarrassing me..."

"Almost there! Oh, but I want to try a couple different compositions, so give me about fifteen more minutes, please!"

"Huhhh?!" Miyako shouted at Kaiko's merciless instructions, beginning to quiver.



“Whew...”

The manga modeling session complete, Miyako decided to head straight for the bath. She sighed deeply as she sank into the tub.

It had been about a month since she began sharing this apartment with Kaiko and Nayuta. They had exercised more restraint around one another at first, sharing a home and everything, and so the living room, kitchen, toilet, and bath were all kept in good condition. Once the furniture was all in place and it began feeling more like a home, however, things loosened up.

Nayuta was the chief culprit, of course. She didn't know how to do any chores, her work/sleep cycle fluctuated wildly, and she'd often drop in early in the morning, fresh from spending the night at Itsuki's place. She was generally naked inside the place, throwing off her clothes by the front door and leaving them there, and she'd walk around after a bath without toweling off. And she didn't close the bathroom door behind her. In short, a worse roommate might have existed but would be difficult to find.

Kaiko, meanwhile, had prepared for life away from her parents with a little cooking and cleaning practice. She had decent enough skills, but her magazine work often made her too busy to contribute to chores. Her schedule was even less stable than Nayuta's; at one point, she pulled three all-nighters in a row, then slept twenty-four hours straight after making her deadline. She could frequently be heard screaming in her room as she drew manga late at night.

As a result of this, over time, Miyako had become responsible for the laundry, cleaning, cooking, taking out the trash, and pretty much everything else. These weren't skills she was particularly gifted at, but over the past month, she had leveled up quite a bit. It was clear this wasn't the greatest roommate setup, but Miyako was still happy with it. Unlike her roommates, who were paying rent with the money they earned, Miyako's parents were covering her costs—and there was no way she'd ever afford such a nice place by herself. Thinking about it that way, household chores were no sweat.

Besides...

If I wasn't here, Nayu and Kaiko would be in big trouble.

There was no doubting the fact that the other two needed her. These were two geniuses with exceptional talents, but without the average college student they lived with, there was no way they could have kept themselves fed and sheltered. Miyako took a dark sort of satisfaction in that, as much as it filled her with self-loathing.

...I'm such a bad person. I'm so lame. I'm awful.

Banishing the negative emotions, Miyako cupped some water in her hands and splashed it on her face.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

I have a question for the three new roommates.
What's a trait you don't have that you're jealous
of one of your roomies for having?



Looking at Miku, I sometimes wish I could draw like her. I'm also jealous of Myaa's legs and butt and stuff.

Sometimes I'm jealous of Nayu's sheer skin, silver hair, and blue eyes. She's incredibly compatible with Western or Scandinavian lingerie. I'm also jealous of Myaa's breasts—they're sized perfectly to take full advantage of all the variations in bra designs out there.



..Whatever's unique about me, I suppose...

Next Year's Cherry Blossoms

When late March came around, the group decided to hold a cherry-blossom viewing party at a park near Gift Publishing and Itsuki's apartment. The attendees included Itsuki, Nayuta, Haruto, Miyako, Chihiro, Toki, and Ashley from last year, as well as Kaiko Mikuniyama, Ui Aioi, and Makina Kaizu—all of them enjoying the food Chihiro made, as well as whatever snacks, beer, and sake they brought along.

“Here you are, Haruto.”

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

Ui poured beer into Haruto's glass. It was Bieken, a Belgian beer notable for its honey content, and there was an illustration of a fetching lass dressed as a honeybee on the label.

Ui was in a sexy dress that exposed a lot of her chest, and if she was pouring beer next to you, this was hard to miss.

Talk about a literal honey trap...

The deep crevice, as well as the occasional glimpses at her bra, made Haruto blush and avert his eyes. Miyako, seated next to him, gave him a disapproving look.

“M-Miyako, this isn't how it...!”

“...I didn't say anything, did I?” She turned her eyes away from Haruto and began eating.

Ui approached her, carrying the bottle of Bieken. “Would you like some, too, Shirakawa?”

“Oh, sure... Thank you.” Miyako held up her cup as Ui poured.

“Um... You too, Ms. Aioi?” she offered, taking up the bottle.

“No need for the *Ms.* I'm still a new author, fresh from my debut. Besides, you're not my supervising editor anyway.”

“...True. In that case, here you are, Aioi.” Miyako gave Ui a warm smile, ignoring the connotations behind what she said as she filled her cup.

“Thanks very much,” Ui said with a smile as she brought the drink to her lips. “Hee-hee! I've never had honey beer before, but it's not all that sweet.”

“No. It does *feel* vaguely like honey, though.” Miyako took a sip herself. The sweet aroma brought out an elegant umami, creating a drink that was refreshing and packed a punch.

The two of them had met for a bit at the New Writers Contest ceremony, so they knew each other's names, but this was the first time they had spoken. Ui had already surmised that Haruto had a thing for Miyako, and Miyako had a vague idea that Ui's obvious overtures toward him were starting to make his heart waver.

"Why did you start working at GF Bunko, Shirakawa?"

"Um, well, Mr. Toki, Itsuki's editor, introduced me to it. It was originally just going to be a summer-break thing, but they kept asking me for help after that, so I just sort of kept going."

"Ahh. Do you want to be an editor later on?"

"Mmm... I'm curious about that, but I'm still not too sure. But you were going to writing school, Aioi?"

"Yes."

"What kind of things do you study there?"

"Well..." Ui thought for a moment. "First, the elements of style. Then, creating characters, plots, coming up with ideas... A lot of things. You have professional writers and editors read your work and give you their expert advice, and I also helped write the story for a game on social media."

"Wow. That sounds impressive. Like you're on the fast track to going pro."

Ui snickered at Miyako's honest admiration. "Well, it's not something that works for everyone."

"Oh?"

"Some people haven't really found anything to do with their lives, but they kind of like anime and light novels, so they join a school for it. Some of the students barely even *read* novels, much less write them. A lot of people quit midway, and even after graduating, a lot of them take jobs outside the entertainment industry."

"That's how it works, huh...?"

Miyako figured people wouldn't attend specialized schools like this unless they had a real drive to turn professional, but apparently that wasn't the case. Maybe they weren't all that different from her, just kind of drifting from high school to college.

"By the way, Shirakawa, have you read any neat books lately?"

"Hmm... I've actually been reading a lot of novels and manga that have editors as the hero. Things like *Henshu Girl* and *Juhan Shuttai*!"

"Oh, I see. Yeah, I'm kind of interested in novels starring writers, too. Having someone close to myself as the protagonist helps me empathize with them more."

"Yeah."

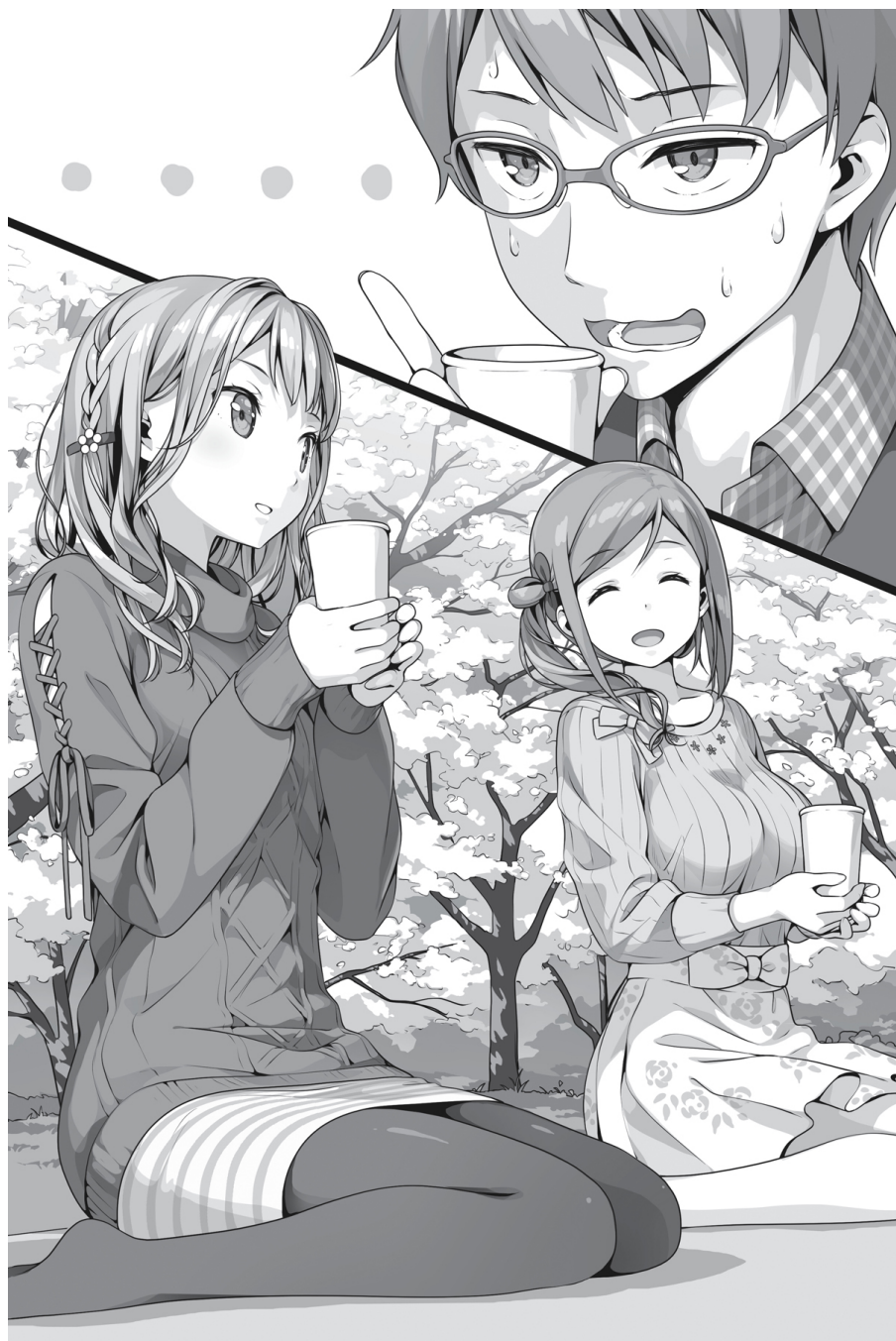
...Miyako and Ui kept the conversation going, talking about novels, manga, movies, magazines, food, and more—but they never talked about Haruto. *I've experienced these kind of probing conversations*

between girls before, Miyako thought, but they never get easier.

But I guess this is normal...

It wasn't normal to start directly shooting for your potential rival in love at the first meeting, like Nayuta did...but of course, Nayuta's abnormal approach helped her grab the heart of her beloved.

Miyako almost wanted to shout "I'm not thinking about Fuwa at all, so feel free to confess your love to him or whatever!!" but it wasn't something to say in front of so many people at this party. Besides...if asked whether she *really* didn't think anything of Haruto, she couldn't concede to that. Seeing Haruto all but melt as Ui approached him absolutely irritated her. Her future, her friends, her love—she had so many troubles that it made her dizzy.



Ui, meanwhile, was smiling and talking with Miyako while trying her best to keep anyone from noticing how she was quivering. Upon hearing about her prize, she had successfully changed her whole look, trying her hardest to study modern fashion in anticipation of encountering Haruto again—but she still wasn't used to contact lenses. A single misstep, and she felt like the facade would start to crumble.

Back at writing school, the only really notable thing about Ui's looks were her breasts. Any time she could've spent out socializing and having fun, she instead used to study novel writing, so she wasn't used to chatting with others. A flashy college student like Miyako wasn't the type to attend writing school at all, so just striking up a conversation made her nervous. If it wasn't for Miyako's editorial job and conversational fluency in books and the industry, it would've been impossible.

So they engaged in a pleasant discussion while hiding the truth from each other. Haruto, meanwhile, watched on from a distance, kept in nervous suspense.



Kenjiro Toki, coming off two all-nighters in a row just like last year, quickly passed out from the beer. Itsuki fell asleep not long after, head carefully perched on Nayuta's lap. Next to her, Kaiko was scarfing down food at an eye-popping rate. She had been working since yesterday, eating and drinking nothing, just so she could have the free time to join this party, so she was ravenously hungry.

Chihiro and Kaizu were chatting away about robot models, while the nearby Ashley was making quick work out of the sake and snacks around her. The sake was called *Onna Nakase*, which meant “makes women cry”—a sweet, mellow *junmai daiginjo* marketed to women. The snacks were *ryukyu*, a local delicacy from Oita Prefecture in western Japan, made with sashimi, chopped onions, and sesame seeds steeped in a half-and-half mix of soy sauce and *mirin* (ratio adjustable to taste) for about half a day. *Inada*, or young Japanese amberjack, was the fish of choice today; the crispy onions, fragrant sesame, and umami-infused fish in the sauce made for an excellent bite. It went perfectly with rice and sake, and you could basically eat it forever.

In fact, Ashley was caught in its magic right now.

“...I'm in so much trouble. So much. This is too good. Wow. This is crazy.” Her brain function was rapidly failing her, but the cycle of *ryukyu* and sake consumption was only accelerating.

“...Whoa, Ashley, don't you think you're going a little fast?” Kaizu

asked, a tad concerned.

Ashley smiled back at him, content. “Hee-hee! I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m all grown up, you know.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Kaizu sighed, then grinned at Chihiro. “She usually acts so well put together...but I guess she’s really cutting loose today.”

“I guess so,” Chihiro replied with a vague smile.



The party began to break up once the sun went down.

“Zzz...zzzzz.....”

“I’m so tired... I don’t want to move...”

“C’mon, Itsuki, hang in there!”

“You okay, Bro?”

As was now becoming the custom, Toki was left under a tree while Itsuki leaned on Haruto’s shoulder and staggered his way home while Chihiro trailed along behind.

“Oohhhh... I feel grrroosssss...”

“Whoa, Kaiko, no puking out here, okay? Hang on until we reach our bathroom back home!”

“If you throw up here, Miku, that means there’s a jinx! Any creator who loves Itsuki’s books is doomed to barf during parties!”

Miyako and Nayuta were accompanying Kaiko, who had managed to both eat *and* drink too much.

“Thanks for inviting me today, Haruto. Hope I see you again soon, Shirakawa!”

Ui gave her a quick bow. They had exchanged contact information, but neither of them knew if anything would come of it.

“Hyaaaahh...snort...”

And Ashley, who had managed to down three full bottles of sake, was awake but completely trashed, wobbling around as she walked.

“...Hey, can you get home okay, Ashley?”

“Yeahhh! I’m headin’ hoooom. I’m alllll growwwwn up.”

Kaizu rolled his eyes at the currently inarticulate Ashley and sighed. “Ah well... I’ll join you on a taxi back home, okay?”

“Uhhh? I—I don’ neeeeeeed it.”

“...Ugh.”

Wincing as he hailed a taxi, he guided Ashley into the back seat before joining her inside. After a few moments, once the car pulled out, Ashley was curled up back there, head resting on Kaizu’s lap as she slept.

“.....I hope...we can all view the blossoms next year, too...”

Noticing some twinkling light around Ashley's eyes as she mumbled in her sleep, Kaizu silently looked away from her—only to make eye contact with the taxi driver via the rearview mirror.

“.....”

“...?” Kaizu was puzzled at the driver, who made no effort to hide his suspicions.

“.....”

Then he impartially considered his situation. Here was a middle-aged man who wasn't exactly in the prime of health, along with a completely hammered girl who possibly didn't look above the legal drinking age.

It *reeked* of criminal activity.



“Um, no, it’s nothing like that...” Panicking, he tried to defend himself, but the driver’s judgmental eyes only became more so.

It took a great deal of hard work to make him understand that Ashley was thirty-three years old and that Kaizu had done nothing to her. When it was all over, Kaizu swore to himself to never share a taxi with a drunken Ashley again.



RYUKYU (fish in dipping sauce)

【INGREDIENTS】

Sashimi fish (*hamachi*, sea bream, *maguro* tuna, salmon—anything works)

Soy sauce: as needed for quantity

Mirin: same amount as soy sauce

Chopped green onions: lots

Sesame seeds: to taste

【STEPS】

- ① Mix the soy sauce and mirin in a 1:1 ratio to make the sauce.
- ② Cut the fish into bite-sized portions.
- ③ Place the fish, chopped green onions, and sesame seeds into a plastic bowl or container. More onions and sesame seeds can be added later.
- ④ Pour the sauce over the fish.
- ⑤ Store in the fridge for around six hours.

HINT!
Adjust the sauce ratio to your liking. If you don't want alcohol, boil the sauce!



The Hangover

The morning after the cherry-blossom viewing, Ashley awoke and hauled herself up, looking like she was at death's door. Her hangover was giving her a pounding headache. It had been a while since she'd gotten so drunk that it lingered on to the next day.

"...Oh...?"

Realizing she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing, Ashley raised an eyebrow.

...Why don't I have any clothes on?

Holding a hand to her throbbing forehead, she tried to recall the events of yesterday. After getting plastered and having Kaizu take her home in a taxi, Ashley demanded to be carried to her bedroom. Looking supremely peeved about this, Kaizu carried her in his arms like a newlywed and carted her to bed. Then, whining like a spoiled child about how she was "*soooooooooo waaaaarrrrrmmm*," she had tossed off all her clothes.

"What have I done...?" Her face grew pale. Try as she could, she couldn't remember a thing after that.

Did...? Did I cross a line with Makina...?

She looked at her lower abdomen, then around her bed. Nothing she saw indicated such activity. But her smartphone (and her beloved vibrator) were on the nightstand, and the phone had a message from Kaizu.

I put a sandwich and some coconut water in the fridge. Enjoy your drink (and your toys) in moderation!

Bright red with shame, she managed to slip on some panties and a nightgown. With an unsteady gait, she left the bedroom, grabbed the plastic bottle of coconut water, and chugged it. There was nothing but sake in the fridge otherwise, so she truly appreciated it. She did. It was true...but this sincere offer of support also really irritated her.

Still, as a grown woman, she'd have to repay him somehow. Finishing off the bottle, Ashley sent a message to Kaizu.

I'm sorry I caused you trouble last night. I'll pay you back later.

No need to go further than that. Better to just keep it simple. But it didn't do much to quell her irritation. *Let's mess with him a little, then.*

Thinking for a moment, Ashley added a sentence.

...You could've reached out and touched me, you know.

It only embarrassed her after she sent it, but imagining Kaizu freak out from it amused her. Then, about ten or fifteen seconds later, she got a reply.

lol

“...! What's *that* mean?!”

Ashley threw her phone on the bed as she fumed.

The New Author and Her Big Brother

It was late April, one full week after GF Bunko's releases for the month had come out on the market—including Aoba Kasamatsu's *Memories of the Sky*. The author's identity as a seventeen-year-old female author with a cover design similar to Nayuta Kani's *Landscape* series had drawn a lot of attention for a debut novel, and sales were decently brisk.

But in a seemingly inverse relationship to this, the reader reviews were less than stellar.

"An inferior rip-off of Nayuta Kani."

"Disappointed."

"I couldn't find a single element that excelled over Nayuta Kani."

"I don't get why you'd let someone like this make her debut after winning the same new-author prize Nayuta Kani did."

"Talk about crass commercialism. Following Nayuta Kani, you can see how bad the publisher wants to make teen-girl authors into a Thing."

"I feel like my beloved Landscape series has been permanently maimed."

It was just as her editor, Yamagata, had predicted—in fact, the reviews were even worse than she'd expected.

If you looked strictly at the book itself, independent of anything else, *Memories of the Sky* was not at all a bad piece of writing. It definitely had the chops to merit the runner-up prize. But the comparison to an incomparable genius like Nayuta Kani must've given readers an even more negative impression than it deserved.

This feedback, of course, quickly reached Aoba Kasamatsu, a girl who'd been on the Net for as long as she could remember. At first, she was enraged but kept up a proud front, going on about "mouth-breathing idiots who don't know how wonderful this is," but as the vitriol kept pouring in for several days on end, she finally had to face reality. Her talent—her work—was a sham, an imitation, nowhere near the level of the "real thing" Nayuta Kani provided.

So Aoba gloomily looked at the Twitter feed on her phone as she walked toward the Gift Publishing building. She had a meeting with Yamagata today to discuss her next book.

Yamagata had been told to respect Aoba's wishes when it came to the choice between writing a sequel to *Memories of the Sky*—sales were

good, after all—or coming up with a new novel. But Aoba had trouble deciding. No matter what she picked, she thought, the future might just be full of more online bashing. Maybe it would be best for everyone if she called it a day now...

In the midst of her moping, she had reached the front door. She tried to go inside, but her legs failed her. She flashed back to her behavior over the past little while, and her eyes teared up from shame. That pathetic speech she gave at the awards ceremony. Her rude callout of the older crop of authors. Her confrontational attitude toward her fellow rookie writers. Her open rebellion against her editor...

...No way. I can't go in.

She just couldn't face Yamagata, the other editors, and the writers she imagined could be inside.

I apologize, but I caught a cold, so I'll need to cancel today's meeting.

Tapping out that text at the entrance, Aoba turned around and walked off.



“Huh? Kasamatsu?”

“?!”

As she staggered to the rail station, staring firmly at the ground, Aoba raised her head at the voice in front of her. It made her shiver. There, wearing a hoodie, was the vaguely androgynous Chihiro Hashima, a grocery bag hanging from one hand. Aoba knew him from the little social event Ui Aioi invited her to last December; he was a year ahead of her in school, and unlike the stern, less-than-lovable Aoba, he was caring, communicative, and bound to be the social center of any class. He was even nice enough to accompany Aoba back to the station that day.

A normal teenage girl might easily have fallen in love with such a kind, attractive young man, but all Aoba felt were pangs of inferiority, along with a twisted sense of superiority—“This guy’s just a normal high school student, but *I’m* a professional novelist, so *I’m better*.” Now, however, even the twisted pride that supported Aoba was about to crack in half.

“Coming back from an editorial meeting?”

“...Pretty much.”

The reply to Chihiro's cheerful question came out awkwardly, she knew.

"...What are you doing here, Hashima?"

"Oh, my brother lives right nearby. I'm about to cook dinner for him."

My brother.

Chihiro Hashima said he was the younger brother of Itsuki Hashima. She didn't care one bit about that guy before placing in the New Writers Contest, but after he went on about building a whole new era at the ceremony, she had marched right up to him, said "*I'm going to build that new era,*" and stormed off.

Then, at the social gathering, she learned that Itsuki and Nayuta Kani were a couple, which interested her enough that she began reading his work. Then she got addicted.

First it was *All About My Little Sister*, Itsuki's most popular work, which had earned an anime adaptation for itself later this year. Then it was *Sisterly Combat*, his other ongoing series. She met Kazuma Akatsuki, the crazed high school student who'd perform any kind of outlandish act for the sake of his sister, and Sieg, the dark knight who fought pitched battles, day and night, for the sister awaiting his return.

Both protagonists drew her in, making her imagine what it'd be like to have big brothers like these. She was the elder sister to two siblings, and her parents both worked, so she was used to taking care of them—thus, for the longest time, she harbored a secret curiosity over what having a caring elder brother was like. Itsuki Hashima's work very neatly fit right into that secret desire of hers.

Ever since *Memories of the Sky's* launch and subsequent thrashing, Aoba was no longer able to read back through her beloved *Landscape* series. Instead she had been reading through Itsuki Hashima's works. Only when she did, marveling at the thrilling tales of heroic big brothers, did her more painful feelings melt away.

"H-heh, um...!"

"Yes?"

"Do you think I could meet with Itsuki Hashima?"

She wanted to apologize for her crassness. She was a pale imitation, she knew, and she wanted to say sorry for opening her big mouth. She shook as she made the request.

"Um, I'm sure it'll be fine, but let me check with him first." Chihiro, looking a bit puzzled, took out his phone.



Hey, is it okay if I bring Aoba Kasamatsu over?

The message from Chihiro made Itsuki wince a little.

That bratty new author, huh...?

He knew she had participated in the social outing Haruto organized, but he didn't expect her to ask to stop by. What would she want from him? He was never that good with suddenly meeting up with someone he wasn't friends with in the first place, but this was a rookie novelist who all but declared war on him at the ceremony. Maybe she'd start mouthing off at him again.

Then again, though, maybe she wasn't coming over for author-related reasons. Maybe she and Chihiro had struck up a relationship or something, and they were going to break the news to him now...but Itsuki had no idea how to deal with *that*, either.

Should I ask him what she wants first...? No, then it'll sound like I'm afraid of this teenage writer. As a veteran, and as Chihiro's big brother, I need to act more confidently.

As his brain ran around in circles like this, he opted to just send the blunt message Sure to Chihiro.

Before very long, as Itsuki waited nervously at his place, Chihiro and Aoba Kasamatsu came in.

"Ha-ha-ha!" he declared. "How nice of you to come in, you impertinent novelist upstart. I'm not going to run from you, and I'm not going to hide!" Itsuki sat at the *kotatsu*, arms crossed and chest puffed out. He was trying his best to act bold. Instead, he was acting like a middle schooler.

Aoba sat across from him. "...Ah...um, good to see you again... Mr. Hashima..." With that awkward greeting, she bowed her head. "...I apologize that I acted so rude to you at the ceremony..."

"Huh. Oh, uh...?" Itsuki was bewildered. This was a completely different girl from the one he saw last year. "...Is something up? You're not acting as cringey...er, I mean, as energetic as you did before."

Tears began to form in Aoba's eyes. "My book finally came out. About a week ago, finally."

"...Oh right, you were due out April."

He had been too busy to buy many books lately, but he still kept an eye on new GF Bunko releases.

"...Everyone hates it."

"Ohhh..."

Now it made sense to Itsuki. If an author was all depressed after their book came out, there could be two reasons: bad initial sales or the readers were tearing it apart.

"...I talked so big at the awards ceremony...but I'm just a

talentless writer who couldn't see who she really was. I'm just an imitation, an inferior copy... I don't have any of the *real* talent Nayuta Kani does."

The halting confessional made Itsuki recall his own past—back to around five years ago, when *Sister of the Apocalypse*, his first work, went on sale.

"Everything about this novel is gross."

"A pile of garbage, packed with the delusions of an obvious virgin."

"The characters are all so insane that I can't empathize with any of them."

"I know this is supposed to be written in Japanese, but I don't understand a single thing in it, and I'm not sure I want to."

"This is nothing you'd ever recommend. If the author wanted to masturbate, he should do it on his own time!"

"I question the good sense of Sekigahara for recommending this one."

And so on...

There were likely worse things said about it, but recalling them just pissed off Itsuki, so he forced them from his mind. Either way, though, despite the small cadre of passionate fans he gained with his debut, it was essentially a perfect storm of criticism. His father blurting out "You wrote *this*?" to his face didn't help their relationship much, either.

...Come to think of it, back then, Itsuki was in his second year of high school. Just like Aoba right now. It was like seeing his past self in his apartment—and given the way she was challenging herself to be the next Nayuta Kani, that genius with God-given talent, she overlapped with his *current* self as well.

"So, Aoba Kasamatsu, what will you do now?"

Resisting the urge to throw more passion into his voice, Itsuki tried to remain calm as he spoke.

"What will I do...?" Aoba looked up, confused.

"Your debut novel got trashed, and your feelings are hurt. The next thing for you to think about is: Am I gonna keep writing novels, or am I gonna quit? That's all."

"...I don't have any talent. I'm just an imitation who looked up to Nayuta Kani. I don't have any right to keep writing—"

"I'm not talking about your *right*, or your *talent*, or anything like that!"

The sharpness in Itsuki's voice visibly startled Aoba.

"Do you want to keep writing novels?" he continued, dropping his tone. "Or not? Which is it?"

"...Sniff..." Aoba was starting to audibly sob now. "...Hnhh... B-

but... But it's not...*sniff*...worth... There's just no point in...*fff*..."

"I'm not talking about whether it's *worth* anything!" Itsuki snapped back. "I don't know how bad your novel's getting slammed, but what do *you* think about it? Do you like it, or do you hate it? Do you care about what happens? Do you love it? Because that's really the only important thing."

Five years ago, Itsuki had struggled with society's response to his own work. He'd managed to win a new-author prize, but maybe he had no talent at all—maybe, he agonized, there was no way he could be anyone's protagonist. But he still wanted to write. The encouragement of his editor, Toki, and fellow prizewinner, Haruto, played a role in that, but in the end, he really loved the stuff he was writing. No matter what anyone said to him, he just couldn't get himself to hate his novels.

"...I—I..." Aoba Kasamatsu struggled to get an answer out. "I... *hnhh*... I like writing...novels... *Mng*...! My novels are...fun...! *Sniff*... I... I...! I love my novel...! *Nngh*...*nnnngh*...!"

Itsuki gave her a kind grin. It was just like gazing at his past self. "Then keep on writing. You don't need talent, or permission, or worth, or meaning, or anything! ...Besides, what's so bad about being an inferior copy? If you keep on writing, you might surpass the real thing someday... And wouldn't that be cool? An imitation surpassing the real thing? Like the hero of a story."

Itsuki was speaking to himself as much as Aoba. But she looked up at him—and this salvation he was offering. After all this time spent being told by readers and her own editor that she's a sham, her heart had been frozen solid—and now Itsuki's words had gently melted the ice away.



“...It’s okay to write if I don’t have any talent? Even if I’m inferior or an imitation...? I can still write novels?”

“Of course you can!”

Itsuki’s own resolve was present in that declaration, delivered as strongly as he could. Aoba sat there, shedding big tears as she sobbed.



After that meeting, the three of them decided to have dinner together. As they ate, Aoba revealed that she became a fan of Itsuki’s after reading his work—a fact that sent him sky-high.

“Well, well! Yeah, even a guy like me thinks that the protagonists in my stories are all cool like that! If you want to make a charming sister shine even brighter, she needs a charming elder brother to frame her!”

“You’re right! I think the readers can really see how a heroine shines when she’s depicted through the loving eyes of the protagonist!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Exactly! It’s a really simple technique but an advanced one, and not too many readers notice it. You’re a smart young lady!”

“Hee-hee-hee...”

Aoba shyly snickered at Itsuki’s compliment. The sharpness was gone from her speech; now that she was sincerely laughing, she was far more approachable.

In good spirits, Itsuki helped himself to some beer. It only added to his nervous energy. “To hell with *all* those haters! Who do they think they are, telling me to go jerk off by myself? What do you think you’re doing with those Amazon reviews then, huh? It’s like whacking it in public in front of the bookstore! Nobody wants to see that shit! Listen, newbie! If you boil it down, *all* creative endeavors are essentially the author jerking off! And when you’re professional writer, tons of people would pay good money to go see! When *I* whack it, it’s worth paying a premium for! And someday, I’m gonna invent amazing new techniques that’re gonna wow people all over the world!”

“And—and I’ll masturbate, too, Mr. Hashima! Like my life depends on it!” Aoba, whose rebellious tone at the ceremony clashed against the ass-spanking perversity of the speeches, was now following in lockstep with Itsuki, eyes sparkling.

“Yeah! Show me how good you can beat it!”

“You bet! I’ll try my best to be as good as you at it!”

“Ugh! Can you guys stop shouting about masturbation, please?!”

The yelling from a bright-red Chihiro fell on deaf ears.

“Uh, um, Mr. Hashima!”

“Hmm? What is it, newbie?”

“Getting to talk to you today has really opened my eyes! Do you mind if I call you my master?!”

Itsuki looked at the dead serious Aoba, thinking a bit. “No! You can’t!”

“Aw...”

“Don’t call me your master! You need to call me Big Bro!”

It was the raving of someone completely drunk—but to Aoba, who always idolized the idea of a big brother, it was joyous news.

“Yes! Yes, Big Bro!”

“Wh-whoa, Kasamatsu! What are you saying?! Also, stop acting stupid around her, Itsuki!” Chihiro was panicking.

“Heh-heh... *Big Bro*... Nothing echoes more beautifully in my mind...”

“I hope you’ll keep offering me help, Big Bro!”

“Yeah! That’s it! More! Say it again!”

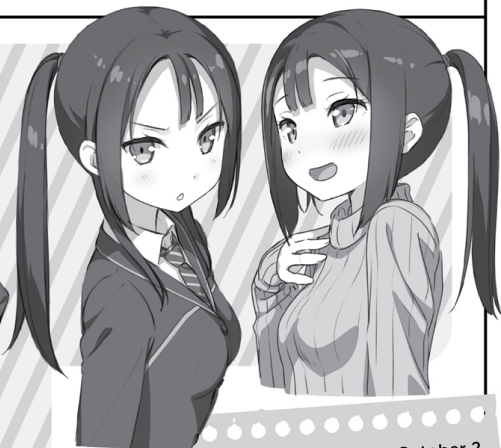
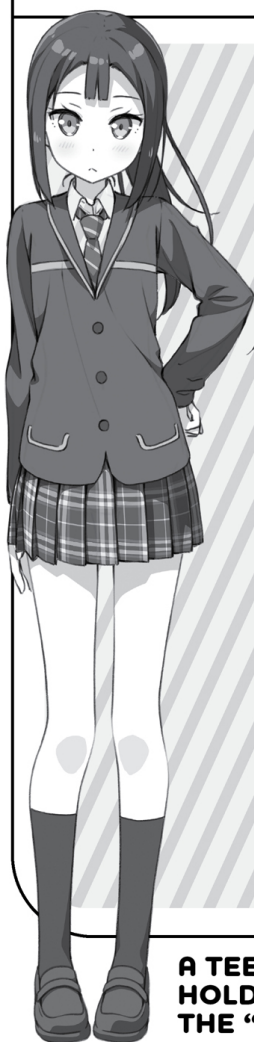
“Big Bro! Big Bro! Big Bro!”

“Weh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

Itsuki grinned widely, completely rapt, as Aoba parroted out the words. It put Chihiro in a pouty, sullen mood.

“Nngh... You’re such a massive idiot, Big Bro...”

A O B A K A S A M A T S U



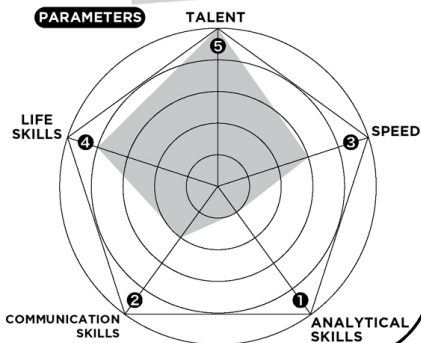
AGE: 16

BORN: October 2

A new writer who won second prize in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

Novel: *Memories of the Sky*

PARAMETERS



**A TEEN WRITER, SMALL BUT FIERCE,
HOLDING THE POWER TO BECOME
THE “REAL THING”**

Serious Trouble (What's So Serious? The Fact That It Happens All the Time)

On a late afternoon near the end of April, Itsuki was working in his apartment when he got a call from his editor, Toki.

...*He didn't want pages from me, did he?*

Volume 6 of *All About My Little Sister* was due out in June, and he had already wrapped up the first draft. Volume 8 of *Sisterly Combat* was launching in July, and while D——ki or F——mi would be at his throat for a submission right now, if G——GA or GF Bunko was the publisher, there was no need to panic about *that* yet.

No, there was nothing to fear from picking this up.

“Right.” Nodding, Itsuki pressed the “Talk” button.

“...Sorry for the rush, but can you come to the office tonight? The anime production team has something they want to discuss.”

“The anime...? What do they want?”

“I haven't heard the details yet...but if I had to guess, some kind of trouble's come up,” Toki replied, and Itsuki froze.



Thus, Itsuki reported to the Gift Publishing conference room at nine that evening. The room contained Toki, editor in chief Satoshi Godo, *All About My Little Sister* anime director Munenori Tarui, producer Tsutomu Oshima, and screenwriter Masahiko Hirugano.

“Good seeing you again, Mr. Hashima,” began Tarui, as calm as ever.

It had been about two months since Itsuki met with the anime staff. The scripts for all twelve episodes were nearly done in late February, and the rest of their anime-related discussions were mostly handled via e-mail. The way Toki described it, storyboard production was well underway by now, but...

Itsuki glanced at Hirugano. The scripts should've been finished by now, but having the screenwriter show up at this emergency meeting was a red flag. Fighting back the crashing waves of fear in his mind, he sat down and waited to hear the news.

Oshima, the producer, was the one who spoke first, his face tense. “...Well, to be frank, it’s all but a given that our production schedule is lagging seriously behind.”

“Wha...?! Wh-what do you mean by that...?!”

Itsuki was floored. Toki and Godo, likely just as in the dark until now, nervously scowled.

“...Could you explain why?” Godo, with his yakuza looks and low, threatening voice, asked Oshima to continue.

Beads of sweat began to appear on Oshima’s forehead; in his place, Tarui laid out the story.

“Well, Yamada, our production assistant, has fled.”

“What?” Itsuki, unsure what this meant, did a double take.

“Our production assistant Yamada fled.” This was Kakeru Yamada, who was in his mid-thirties—a tall man with a tanned, athletic build. He was always there for any important meeting, but Itsuki hadn’t talked directly with him too much, so he didn’t know a great deal about his temperament. He *did* recall that he looked kind of tired most of the time, though.

Itsuki wasn’t exactly sure what kind of work a production assistant did, but he knew it was something important. They literally had to assist the production, and that involved keeping each section collaborating with the others, making contacts, retrieving art from the animators, sorting out location scouting, and so forth.

“Um...what do you mean by *fled*?”

“He hasn’t contacted us at all in the past two weeks. He also hasn’t been back home in that time, so he’s currently missing. I think we’re gonna have to assume that he took off.”

“How can you be so calm about that?! Like, did he get involved in something bad, or...?!” Itsuki’s voice was starting to rise. Tarui displayed his usual calm demeanor.

“Well, the chances of that aren’t zero, no...but it’s actually pretty common for production assistants to ghost.”

“It is?!”

“Yes.” Tarui nodded.

Oshima and Hirugano both closed their eyes and shook their heads.

“Very common.”

“You hear about it all the time.”

Toki and Godo were wincing. For an editor, writers and illustrators flying the coop was fairly common as well. This wasn’t exactly unfamiliar territory.

“Seriously...?”

“Right now,” Tarui calmly told the stunned Itsuki, “we’re having other people take on Yamada’s work, but at this point, there’s no way

to avoid production delays.”

“There’s no way...? That’s crazy! It’s terrible for me!”

“I know it is,” Tarui earnestly said as Itsuki began to shout. “At the current pace, no matter how hard we try, there’s no way we’re going to make all twelve episodes as planned. So we wanted to discuss things with you, Mr. Hashima, and you, Mr. Hirugano... Essentially, we’d like to rework the series into eleven episodes and place a clip show or special program into the broadcast run.”

“...I see,” Toki said. “So taking a break for one episode will allow you to get back on schedule?”

“Yes.” Oshima nodded. “At this point, it’s cutting it close...*really*, *really* close...but we can adjust things for it in time.”

“Mmm...mmmmmm...”

Itsuki murmured to himself as he thought about this. Yes, instead of forcing the current schedule and running the risk of missing a broadcast date or wrecking the show’s visuals, maybe it’d be better to just cut out an episode from the start. But the current twelve-episode setup of the *All About* anime had been discussed time, time, and time again by Itsuki, Hirugano, and Tarui, occasionally with loud voices and emotions boiling over. It was an arduous, painful process, but they had slogged through it successfully.

“...The current setup, I think, couldn’t be better. It respects the original novels, but it still stands on its own as a complete anime work.” But Itsuki was not the one sternly refusing, but rather Hirugano. “If we have to change it, the results are clearly going to be lower in quality than we first pictured. Do we still absolutely need to make this change?”

“Yes. That’s what we’re asking you for,” Tarui said, nodding as he met Hirugano’s eyes. “...And also, I apologize, but we’ve already completed the storyboards for episodes one through four, so we can’t change those.”

Itsuki and Hirugano winced even harder. If you had to compress twelve episodes to eleven, the common-sense approach was cutting just a bit out of every installment, but apparently that wasn’t possible.

After an extended silence, Hirugano, his mind made up, gave his answer. “If we can’t change the first half, then from a quantity standpoint, it’s gonna be physically impossible to compress twelve episodes of content. Which means...”

“Which means?” Itsuki asked, nervously gulping.

“...We’ll have to apply our original ending to the anime.”

“The original ending...”

Itsuki and Toki gave each other embittered looks.

The first time they met with the anime staff, Hirugano’s proposal involved a patchwork of scenes from the novel, followed by an anime-

original “final boss” character the cast defeated in the final story arc. Itsuki had been dead set against that, and that’s how the novelist, screenwriter, and director’s passionate march of intense story meetings kicked off.

“So...it’s back to the drawing board...?”

Itsuki’s voice sounded powerless and distant. But:

“We won’t go back to the drawing board. No matter what.”

Hirugano’s voice was driven, somehow inspired.

“Not that I’m one to talk, but I can’t let us have the slapdash approach I proposed to you first. I’ve read the original novels multiple times since then, to the point that I’ve all but memorized each one, and I understand what the ‘little-sister love’ trope is all about now. I’ve also been cleaning up with my little sisters more often lately.”

“I didn’t need to hear that,” Itsuki scornfully muttered—but it was followed by a small snicker. “You’re right, though. It’s *not* back to the drawing board...! Let’s do it! Let’s restructure this series! We’ll plot out an original story arc that’ll shock and amaze the novel fan base!”

“Yes! We can do it, Mr. Hashima!”

Itsuki and Hirugano stood up, their resolve firm.

Tarui looked on with a quiet smile. “...All right. In that case, let’s start making suggestions for the new structure right away. I’ll let you guys keep going for as long as you like.”

And so it was back to story-pitch time, Itsuki taking an active part in the discussions. Hirugano, now fully awake to the little-sister appeal, had four real-life little sisters giving him insights that Itsuki—even with the fruitful imagination he had to work with—couldn’t have stumbled upon. It was tremendous inspiration for him.

The meeting continued well into the wee hours...and by the end of it, they had a basic plan. Episodes five through nine, based on Volume 2 of the novel, would now foreshadow the ending on a more frequent basis. Episode ten would trace the first half of Volume 3 but then veer off in its own direction, and episode eleven would end with the final boss being defeated.

It meant a full rewrite of episodes ten and eleven, but in order to stick to the updated schedule, they’d need to punch out those scripts in no more than ten days. Two episode scripts in ten days was asking a lot of Hirugano, so they decided that Hirugano would work on episode ten (with the novels as a base) while Itsuki himself cranked out the fully original episode eleven at the same time.

“This schedule’s a real tightrope,” whispered Itsuki, wincing at the morning sun as he exited the publisher’s building. “My stomach hurts just thinking about it.”

“It’s a pretty common thing in the anime biz,” Tarui replied with a soft smile. “On a scale of one to ten, with ten being ‘We’ve completely exhausted every means possible,’ this is still about a two or a three.”

Tarui seemed mild mannered, almost aloof as he said it, but to Itsuki, he looked like a war-hardened hero, involved in countless desperate conflicts and still around to tell the tale. (Instead of going home, by the way, he apparently had to run right back to the production studio.)

The anime industry is way too crazy...

It wasn’t the first time he thought that, but it still sent shivers down his spine.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What do you think is the most important thing
a professional novelist needs?



Love for little sisters.



An unbreakable heart, I guess.



Their health.



It depends on the writer,
is all I can tell you.



Common sense.



Rest.

Just Supposing...

It was just another normal day in May; Chihiro was wrapping up dinner preparations and sitting down to eat with Itsuki as usual.

The menu that day was seafood curry with shrimp and avocado salad, along with a potage soup made with a broth flavored with shrimp shells. Chihiro was particularly proud of that.

“You’ve sure been busy lately, Bro.”

Deep lines circled Itsuki’s eyes. Stubble was prevalent across his face. He was clearly tired out, but there was still bold ambition behind his smile.

“Yeah, kind of. Writing an anime script requires a different approach from a novel. It’s not even like the drama CD I wrote before...but I think I’m getting the hang of it. Now I just need to bang it out.”

“Sounds like you’re working really hard.”

“I am. It’s do-or-die with the anime now. We’re right at the point that it either turns out decent, or it doesn’t. And Mr. Hirugano’s pouring everything into this, too...as well as editing the script I’m writing. I gotta keep up.”

Itsuki’s eyes were dead serious, as if he were eyeing some distant foe.

“Mr. Hirugano’s the screenwriter, right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Did you speak with him, Chihiro? He’s got four real-life little sisters.”

“Wow, a family with five kids? That’s a lot.”

“Totally... He showed me a photo a while back, but they don’t look like him at all. They’re all so young and beautiful...! And plus, he’s married to that goddess Kohime Shiratori, the actress who does all those little-sister roles! And I guess reading *All About*—or hanging out with me anyway—has brought him around to the whole little-sister thing, so he’s even taking baths with them now...! *Gaaahhhh*, why does he get to star in a real-life dating sim, and I don’t?! Dammit...! I’m so jealoussssss...”

His voice heated up as he spoke, until his frustration so vivid that he was liable to burst out sobbing.

“Ch-chill out, Bro!”

“...*Huff, huff, huff*...” Itsuki took a few moments to catch his

breath. "...But thanks to that, he's become the one man I can trust as the *All About* screenwriter. On the other hand, I can't lose out to that little-sister gigolo when it comes to writing. No way his real-life experiences can beat my sister-magination!"

The complex mixture of trust and hostility in Itsuki's voice was clear as he spoke. It made Chihiro extra-careful when she spoke up.

"Um...by the way, Bro..."

"Yeah?"

"Like...just supposing... Let's say you actually *did* have a little sister. What would you do then?"

"Hmmm..." Itsuki thought for a moment. "It's hard to say unless it actually happened, really. But I'd definitely give her a ton of love, and I'd definitely enjoy life with her... It'd also mean that I couldn't scratch and claw my way to the ultimate sister ideal, maybe, like I do with my creative endeavors."

With an indiscreet smile, he approached the question with just a tiny pinch of seriousness. Chihiro reacted with a vague sort of smile.

...No, now's not the right time to tell Itsuki the truth. My presence would just be an obstacle on my brother's road...

...But I want him to love me as his sister.

The thought was definitely in Chihiro's mind.

"But no point talking in hypotheticals. I'll just let Ashley and Aoba call me Big Bro and be happy with that!"

"Oh, Itsuki..."

Itsuki tried to joke about it, hiding his embarrassment. Chihiro snickered at him, but inside, she was beginning to feel some honest frustration.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Do you watch any Western dramas?
If you do, tell me what you're watching.



I'm really into *Game of Thrones* lately. It'd be so awesome if I could get my work produced with that insane level of quality... (staring into the distance)



I kind of like *The Walking Dead*.
I liked *The X-Files* back in the day, too.



Lost, *ER*, *Sherlock*... I keep tabs on the big names, more to study them than as a hobby. Of course, most popular series are popular because they're *good*, so it's still a fun experience for me.

The Angel Descends from Heaven

It was early May, about four in the afternoon. Japan usually takes a weeklong vacation at that time of year, but Itsuki was busy having heated arguments with Hirugano and the rest at the anime story meetings held in the Gift Publishing building.

Wrapping that up, followed by a half-hour novel-edit session with Toki (mostly deadline negotiation), Itsuki took the elevator down to the first floor. He was a bit grumpy; the negotiations didn't go all that well—but as he walked to the exit, he saw someone ahead of him. It was an elderly man in Japanese clothing, standing tall and straight and looking every bit like a well-preserved samurai.

Cool guy. I remember him...

This was Yoshihiro Kiso, a new author who debuted in March that Kenjiro Toki edited for. Having the same editor—and curious about what kind of light novel a man in his late sixties would decide to write out of nowhere—Itsuki had picked up and read through a copy of *Tsurugi: Sword of Sengoku*. Between the epic storytelling, the intense and vibrant battle scenes, and the lively cast (including Tsurugi herself, the main heroine), it really drew him in. Even ignoring the author's age, he was truly impressed by this debut.

Still, he had never spoken with Kiso personally, so he just nodded at him as he passed by. But:

“Pardon me...are you Mr. Itsuki Hashima?”

Itsuki was surprised to hear Kiso speak up. “Oh, um, yes, I am. Have we, uh, spoken before...?” he asked gingerly.

Kiso shook his head. “No. I saw you at the awards ceremony, so I'm merely aware of you, is all.”

...Come to think of it, Itsuki *did* identify himself when he claimed his raffle prize, but he didn't expect anyone to recall the name.

“My name is Yoshihiro Kiso, and I made my novel debut in March after winning a prize in the New Writers Contest. I believe you and I both share Mr. Toki as an editor?”

Kiso accentuated the polite self-intro with a deep bow, and Itsuki internally panicked a bit. No elderly person had ever approached him with this kind of reverence.

“Ah, uh, hello, my name's Hashima. Um, I had the chance to read your novel. It was, like, really cool.”

“It is an honor to hear that from you. I am still lacking in both learning and ability, but I hope you will give me further guidance and encouragement in the future.”

“Y-yes, absolutely. Me too.”

Kiso bowed again at the completely frozen Itsuki. “Either way, I have a meeting with Mr. Toki, so...”

Just as Kiso was about to finish his sentence:

“Ahh! There you are, Grandpa!”

A young, playful-sounding voice shouted from the entrance, sounding very out of place in an office building. Kiso and Itsuki turned toward it, only to find a girl trotting up to them. She appeared to be midway through elementary school, wearing a long-sleeved kimono with a flashy green design. Her hair was a shiny light blond, and she had sapphire-like blue eyes—it was tremendously cute.

In another instant, her arms were around Kiso.

“Hee-hee!”



The virile, masculine samurai disappeared as he turned into a slightly embarrassed-looking old man.

“Nadeshiko... How did you get here?”

“I took the train!” the girl replied, eyes shining.

Kiso, still concerned, smiled a little. “Well, well, Nadeshiko, that’s pretty smart of you! Taking the train all by yourself... But I told you not to follow me around, didn’t I?”

“But I wanted to go see your publisher!”

“Mmmm...”

Then Kiso noticed Itsuki staring blankly at them.

“Oh, pardon us. This is my granddaughter. Ever since I won that prize, she’s been so excited about writers and publishers, and now I suppose she’s followed me all the way over here.”

“Y-yeah...”

The girl stepped away from Kiso, turned toward Itsuki, and bowed. “Hello! My name is Nadeshiko Kiso, and I’m in the fourth grade!”

Itsuki internally panicked again. If he wasn’t used to dealing with old men, he *certainly* wasn’t used to grade schoolers.

“Oh, h-hello there. My name’s Itsuki Hashima, and I’m twenty-one years old.”

The girl Nadeshiko stared right at him. “Are you a writer? Like Grandpa?”

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

Nadeshiko somehow opened her eyes even wider, smiling like a blooming flower. “Wowww! A writer! That’s great! And you’re so young, too! Neat!”

“Oh, it-it’s nothing that impressive...heh-heh-heh...”

This little girl’s sparkly eyes were making Itsuki self-conscious now.

“But what should I do with you?” Kiso asked. “I have a meeting with Mr. Toki at the moment...”

“Meeting! I wanna go to a meeting, too!”

“Sorry, you can’t... Hmm, should I point her back home? But that could be dangerous...”

Seeing Kiso worry over his grandchild like any grandfather would, Itsuki timidly made an offer.

“Um, I could watch her for you while you’re in that meeting. My place is about a five-minute walk from here.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Hashima, I wouldn’t want to cause you trouble... I think there’s a nap room in the office somewhere...but ahh, I’m sure she’ll go exploring around the building...”

“I want to go see where a writer lives!” Nadeshiko’s eyes shone as

Kiso's face grew darker.

"Well, it's just a regular apartment, nothing that interesting..." said Itsuki, "but I have a lot of games and manga, so I think it'd be perfect for killing time."

"Oh, is that so...? In that case, I will take you up on that offer."

Kiso still looked concerned. "Now, you be a good girl, Nadeshiko."

"Okaaayy!"

"Wish I could trust you more when you say that..." Kiso smiled broadly, sighing at Nadeshiko's energetic response. "...Thank you very much, Mr. Hashima."

"Sure."

"C'mon, sir, let's go!"

Nadeshiko grabbed Itsuki's hand... It was small and so soft. Itsuki's lips curled up a bit at the unfamiliar feeling, even as Kiso sharply addressed him.

"Now, Mr. Hashima, if you should do anything untoward with Nadeshiko..."

"If—if I...?"

"Your head will roll."

"M-my head...?!"

His face remained frozen in fear as Kiso studied him for a little bit.

"...I was joking."

"...Oh. Right."

It wasn't remotely funny. Itsuki did not relax as Nadeshiko pulled his hand forward and started to walk.



Nadeshiko was the daughter of Yoshihiro Kiso's second child, by the sound of it, and her father was from Sweden. She was Japanese, however, by citizenship as well as upbringing; she had never left the country before, and Japanese was her only language.

"Wow... Kind of like Kanikou, huh?"

Itsuki whispered this to himself as he listened to Nadeshiko tell him all about it on the way to his apartment.

"Kanikou?" Nadeshiko tilted her head a little in the cutest way. It made Itsuki smile again.

"Oh, I have a friend named Nayuta Kani, but her dad's from Russia. She's got silver hair and blue eyes."

"Oooh, that's like my mom and dad. They called it an international marriage! Is Kanikou a writer, too?"

"Yep."

"Wowww... I want to meet her!"

“Well, if we have the chance...”

“Great! I can’t wait to!” Nadeshiko jumped around in delight. Itsuki’s heart was similarly jumping around in his body.

...*What kind of angel is this?*

He could feel his heart, torn to pieces by days of unending work terrors, instantly purify itself.



“Hello!”

At the apartment, they found Chihiro making dinner in the kitchen.

“Oh, hey there, Bro—”

“Is this your apartment, mister?!”

“It sure is.”

The sight of Nadeshiko bounding in behind Itsuki stunned Chihiro into silence.

“Oh, Chihiro, this kid is... Chihiro?”

Itsuki gave the trembling Chihiro a puzzled look.

“Itsuki... I believed in you... I know what you write, but still! You have a girlfriend! I thought you knew what you can and can’t do in real life...!”

“Chihiro, you’ve *seriously* got the wrong idea, don’t you?”

“...Let’s just go to the police station now, all right? I’ll wait as long as it takes for you to serve your—”

“Aha! So you think I found this blond-haired little girl on the street and tricked her into calling me mister and following me into my apartment, huh? Is that it?”

“Yes,” Chihiro replied, completely in earnest.

“I’d *never* do that!” Itsuki shouted back.

“...You really didn’t?”

“Of course not.”

Chihiro still looked pretty doubtful about it, so Itsuki gave the full explanation with some irritation in his eyes.

“...And so I’m just watching her until Mr. Kiso’s meeting is over.”

“...Oh. That’s what was going on...?”

“And you know, you treating me like a criminal honestly makes me kinda sad...”

Chihiro averted his eyes. “...I’m sorry. I dunno; I’ve just had trouble trusting people lately...”

“Oh... Did something happen?”

He honestly looked pretty down, and Itsuki began to regret ragging on him about it. Then Nadeshiko chimed in:

“Um, is this your little sister?”

“*Fwehh?!*” The sudden question completely threw Chihiro.

Itsuki snickered. “No, this is Chihiro. He’s my younger brother.”

“Ohhh, your brother? Excuse me!”

“Y-yeah...” Chihiro put on his best smile. “I’m a guy, so...”



“Wow! This is a writer’s room?!”

Nadeshiko’s eyes shone as she looked around the living room, just a few steps from the kitchen. Then:

“It’s totally...normal!”

“Told you,” replied Itsuki with a smile.

“But Grandpa’s room has swords—and a suit of armor and stuff!”

“...That’s...exactly what I pictured, yeah.” Itsuki took a serious moment to imagine the space.

“So which of these books is yours, mister?” Nadeshiko toddled her way toward a bookshelf.

“Oh, my books...”

But just as he reached out to grab a copy of his work, he internally gasped. Everything he wrote was in the little-sister genre—that was fine, more or less. The problem was that essentially every volume of his contained at least one illustration of a completely nude girl. Was that really something he could show off to a nine-year-old? Yoshihiro Kiso had read at least a few light novels for study purposes; he didn’t think he was the kind of narrow-minded old man who treated all sexually oriented content as smut, but that didn’t mean it was okay to show off to his granddaughter. Besides, Itsuki couldn’t bear to expose such a perfect little angel to things like that.

After some extended internal anguish:

“Uh, here, I wrote this one.”

He took Volume 1 of *Ayakashi Gatari* (a supernatural samurai-drama series) off the shelf and handed it to Nadeshiko. She gleefully accepted it, peering intently at the cover.

“Wa... Wata...fune...?”

“Wataru Watari. That’s my pen name,” Itsuki said, puffing his chest out and lying with gusto.

“Huh? But isn’t your name Itsuki Hashima?”

His face tensed up at the astute observation. “Well, Itsuki Hashima is my real name. I think your grandfather is using his real name to write under, but a lot of writers use pen names, too. It’s kind of like a second name you use when you’re writing.”

“Wow, really? Did you create your own pen name?”

“I sure did.”

“So why did you choose Wataru Watari, mister?”

How the hell do I know where someone else's pen name came from?!
he internally screamed. But he tried his hardest to come up with something.

“Well, Wataru Watari is kind of a poetic way to say ‘crossing the ocean.’ You see, when I’m writing, I always want my books to be loved overseas, too, by people all over the world. That’s why I went with that name.”

“Wow! That’s really cool, sir! It’s a lot of, uh, ambition!”

“Y-yeah, isn’t it?”

He forced a smile, basking in the respect of the child before him. Chihiro’s eyes, however, were much colder as he watched his brother.

“So is it all right if I call you Wataru Watari from now on, mister?”

“N-no, no, please don’t! ...Just call me your big brother Itsuki.”

“All right, Big Brother Itsuki!”

“Weh-heh-heh...”

Itsuki couldn’t help but beam at Nadeshiko as Chihiro began to apply more force to his kitchen knife.



After she thumbed through Itsuki’s book (or something close to it), Nadeshiko’s curiosity turned toward his shelf of board games. She said she wanted to play something, and after considering what a schoolchild could handle, he ultimately settled on a box labeled *Viva Topo!*

“Ooh, mice! They’re so cute!”

Nadeshiko smiled at the wooden mouse-shaped pieces she picked up from the box. “Cute is right,” Itsuki said, looking at her with a wide grin.

Viva Topo! is a German board game where players roll a die to move multiple mice around the game board. If a piece reaches a room with cheese in it, they earn the cheese, and the player with the most cheese points wins the game. The board has several cheese rooms, with the biggest pieces of cheese available in the room you start the farthest away from—but once a mouse enters a cheese room, they can’t move after that. This means that you want to get as many mice as you can to the faraway rooms, but a bad roll of the die may advance the cat upon your mice, knocking them out of the game.

The rules are simple, but the game isn’t at all a die-driven luck contest. The dilemma the rules present—play it safe and collect cheese

from nearby rooms or risk a cat attack and set off for farther rooms—made it one of those classically “fun for kids from five to ninety-five” board games.

“Whooooaaaa, my mouse got eaten again!” Itsuki cried.

“You’re trying too hard, Big Bro!”

“Well, listen, sometimes you need to keep fighting even when you know the battle’s dangerous!”

“Really? But I feel bad for the mice who get caught...”

“...! ...You’re right... You’re so thoughtful, Nadeshiko...”

The mere hint of sadness on Nadeshiko’s face made Itsuki pat her on the head with the gentleness of a kind big brother (well, more like a grandpa, really).

“Hey,” she said, laughing, “that tickles!”

While the two of them were playing, Itsuki was on the floor, legs spread, and Nadeshiko was in between them as she faced the table. It was a little unnerving when she chose to sit like that, but he didn’t speak up. Every time she moved, her sweet-smelling, shiny-blond hair tickled his face, making him happier than he could explain.

...So heaven was here all along...

Now he knew how Subaru Hasegawa and Yaichi Kuzuryu felt.

“This is the best day ever,” he earnestly whispered.

“Huh? What was that, Big Bro?”

“Wha—? Oh, nothing!”

Watching his brother’s big, stupid grin, Chihiro took his knife and chopped the head off the fish on the counter.



Just past six PM, Yoshihiro Kiso came over with Toki to pick up Nadeshiko. She promptly hugged her grandfather at the front door.

“I’m glad you’re done with work, Grandpa!”

“Yes, yes. Were you a good girl?”

“Uh-huh! I played a whole bunch with Big Bro Itsuki here!” Kiso’s eyes turned toward the regretful-looking Itsuki.

“Thank you for your help today, Mr. Hashima. I’ll be sure to repay the favor later.”

“Oh, no, you really don’t have to! In fact, I wish she could be here all the time!”

Kiso laughed at the inadvertent truth.

“...Oh! I know! Um, since you’re here, would you like to have dinner with us?!”

It was a pretty blatant attempt at hanging on to her, but Kiso gently shook his head. “No, no, we’d best be on our way. Come,

Nadeshiko. Say thank you to Mr. Hashima.”

“Okay!” she said, turning toward Itsuki. The thought of this angel leaving him almost brought tears to his eyes.

“Thank you very much, Big Bro! Can I come back and play games with you again sometime?”

“Of—of course! Anytime! I’ll get in some more children’s games next time!”

“Wow, that sounds like fun! Good-bye for now, Big Bro!”

“Ohhh, good-bye... Good-bye, Nadeshiko...!”

She gave him a wave as she left with Kiso. Itsuki stood there at the front door, continually waving until they were out of sight.

“Ahhh... She’s gone... Awwwww... Well, time for dinner...”

Shoulders slumped, voice bereft of its soul, Itsuki turned around to find Chihiro setting the table, clearly miffed. There was an audible clang as he banged the dish of fried fish against the table.

“...Are you angry about something, Chihiro?” Itsuki asked, puzzled.

“No!”

“...You are, aren’t you?”

“I’m not! I was just thinking that you’d fall for anyone who’ll call you Big Bro enough, wouldn’t you?!”

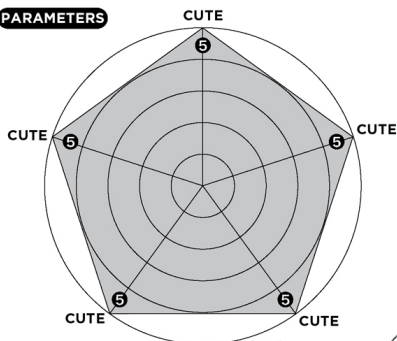
The sullen retort made Itsuki think for a moment.

“...You know what? You might be right.”

The deadpan response only upset Chihiro more.

NADESHIKO KISO

PARAMETERS



AGE: 9

BORN: February 24

Yoshihiro Kiso's granddaughter, a fourth grader with a Swedish father and a Romanian grandmother. An innocent, curious girl who's never too timid.



**THE ULTIMATE ANGEL
AND EMBODIMENT OF "CUTE
MAKES RIGHT"**

What She Knew

It was a few days past the Golden Week holiday as a sullen Chihiro trudged toward Itsuki's apartment.

The results from the aptitude test for her third year of high school, taken back at the end of April, had just returned, and they weren't what she'd hoped for. She was in the upper ranks, but for someone who had always been near the top in this school, the scores were on the low end, making both her teacher and her parents wonder if something was up.

Something *was* up. When would she reveal her secret to Itsuki? Or was it even all right to reveal? But more than that—whenever fellow writer Aoba Kasamatsu or grade schooler Nadeshiko Kiso called Itsuki “Big Bro,” and he melted into their hands, it really riled her. *She* was his younger sister—it should've been *her* receiving that kind of attention. But those two weren't in the family, so they were able to be spoiled all day—and because they weren't related to him, Itsuki was free to play pretend to his heart's content.

“...I feel like I'm the only one losing out,” she complained.

Just then...

“Aaahhhh!!”

Chihiro looked up toward the loud voice. There she saw a compact young man with a hairdo that was impossible to forget.

It was Pablo Purikesso. She had let down her guard. Whenever she was close to Itsuki's place, she always kept a close eye on her surroundings to keep from running into him—but today, her mind had wandered too much.

Just as expected, Pablo began running toward her at full speed.

“Ah...!”

She turned around, attempting to escape—

“Hyahh!”

But her heavy shopping bag threw her off-balance, tangling her legs and sending her to the ground. A lone potato from the bag rolled down the sidewalk.

“Hey, are you okay? Are you hurt?” The worried Pablo picked up the potato as he asked.

“I-I'm fine,” Chihiro said as she stood up.

“Then, great,” he replied, handing over the spud.

“Um, thank you...” She hurriedly placed it back in the bag and bowed lightly.

“No, no, I’m the one who oughtta thank you!”

“Huh?”

“Like, you showed me half your ass a little while ago, right? It’s really boosted my art! Thank you so much!” He bowed until his upper body was parallel to the pavement.

“D-don’t act like I *agreed* to it!” Chihiro’s face reddened as she protested.

Pablo didn’t seem to hear. “So I have another request!”

“No!”

“But I didn’t even say it yet!”

“Well, you’ll just ask me to show off all of my...my rear end, won’t you?”

“There’s that, yeah, but it’s not my first priority right now!”

“Huh?” Chihiro looked puzzled at the completely serious Pablo.

“Would you mind letting me **slap** your ass?!”

“Whaaaa—?!” Chihiro nearly screamed.

This was even more nonsensical than anything he had asked before.

“S-slap my rear end...?!”

“You don’t have to take off your clothes this time! We can do it through your pants! Like, nude would be best, of course, but I wanna know how it, you know, *feels* and stuff—and the sound and vibration!”

This made no sense to Chihiro whatsoever, but she could tell Pablo meant every single word.

“...And is *this* for your ‘art,’ too?”

“Of course, man! If I wanna keep up with Yanagase’s crazy enthusiasm, then I got no choice but to find someone’s ass to slap!”

Chihiro cowered at his earnest eyes. She recalled the art she saw at the park the other day. She was no expert, but she could tell Pablo really *was* a good artist. You needed real talent—real passion—to draw stuff like his.

Pablo, no doubt, was a creative person who expressed things his own way, much like Itsuki. She didn’t want to shackle her brother... hence why she continued to keep her secret from him.

“The answer is still no!”

Pablo, on the other hand, didn’t matter at all.

“Aw, cut me a break!”

“Absolutely not!”

“Just one slap! One slap is all I’m asking!”

“No!”

Chihiro knew where this was going. Just like always, Pablo would

try to find a way to aim for her rear. She tensed up her legs and took a breath, mentally preparing to make a run for it.

But:

“...All right. I’ll leave you alone today.”

“Huh?”

This was beyond comprehension.

Pablo gave Chihiro a light grin. “It’s not nice to coerce people, after all. I’m gonna work hard until I can convince you to show me your ass!”

“Uh...”

He lowered his head in a deep bow. “So please! Can you give me your name and contact information?!”

Chihiro’s heart wavered at this serious, sincere request... *Come to think of it, I haven’t given him my name, have I?* But she resisted the idea of giving this young man any personal information.

“I don’t want you to have my contact...but my name is Chihiro.”

Just the revelation of her first name made stars of joy dance across Pablo’s eyes.

“Chihiro! That’s a rad name!”

“Thank you...”

Pablo’s reaction gave her mixed feelings. She didn’t dislike the name—in fact, she was rather fond of it. But the fact that Chihiro is a unisex name in Japan, applicable to boys and girls equally, was just one more reason it was possible to hide her gender from Itsuki. Thinking of it that way, she wasn’t sure how “rad” a name it was.

“Um...is Pablo a pseudonym, then?”

Chihiro had given her name. It seemed only fair for him to supply his. But Pablo returned this question with a puzzled look.

“Pablo...?”

“...Pablo Purikesso? That’s your pseudonym, right?”

“Ohhh!” He nodded to himself. “Yeah, I *did* use that name, didn’t I? But I got off of my cubism kick, so I dropped that one a while ago! To me, drawing cute girls is the best thing out there!”

“Uh...?”

Thus, facing the bewildered Chihiro, he gave a cheerful smile and stated his name.

“My *real* name’s Setsuna Ena! I do illustration work under the name Puriketsu!”

Chihiro’s face froze.

Chihiro's Panic

After parting ways with Pablo—with Setsuna Ena—Chihiro headed for Itsuki's apartment, fretting anxiously. Setsuna Ena. Pen name: Puriketsu. Never for a moment did she make the connection.

He was the illustrator for *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, Itsuki Hashima's second series, and apparently he and Chihiro's brother were a good match, because they still hung out even after the series ended. They had even gone on a trip or two together.

On average, though, Setsuna only visited Itsuki's apartment about once a month, so they had never run into each other before. That, of course, was just the luck of the draw. If Chihiro kept coming to Itsuki's place, there was an extremely high chance that Chihiro would see him at her own brother's apartment. Even worse, Setsuna apparently didn't carry a smartphone around and tended to drop in without warning, so there was no way to predict when he'd show up.

And if that's how things were...then instead of all three of them running into one another, and Itsuki finding out she was a girl, it was probably better to just explain everything to Setsuna and ask for his assistance in keeping it a secret.

She'd need to meet with Setsuna again. Now she regretted not exchanging contact info earlier—but he still did work for GF Bunko, and anyway, he was incredibly eager to see her again. Chances were they'd spot each other around this neighborhood before too long.



But even if she explained things to him, would he be willing to cooperate? Already, Chihiro could imagine Setsuna sneering.

“Geh-heh-heh... If you don’t want me to spill the beans, you know what to do, right?”

“Y-yes...all right... You just want to slap my rear one time, right...?”

Setsuna would no doubt laugh maliciously at the trembling Chihiro. “Ee-hee-hee! I don’t think that’s gonna be enough, no... I need you to take off your pants and show me your entire ass...”

“Oh noooo...”

Showing her naked self to someone who wasn’t even her lover disgusted her. But she’d do it anyway—Itsuki’s career was at stake. And even with all that shame, all that humiliation, she’d lower her pants, and...

“...What am I even *thinking* about?!”

Blushing furiously, she shook her head to banish the prurient thought from her imagination.

...The search for Setsuna could begin tomorrow. For now, she had dinner to make at Itsuki’s.



“Hello!”

Using her key to get in, Chihiro found a pair of woman’s shoes by the front door. *Kani or Miyako, maybe?* she thought as she ventured into the living room. Instead, Aoba Kasamatsu was chatting with Itsuki around the *kotatsu*.

“Hey, Chihiro,” Itsuki said.

Aoba gave her a sincere smile. “Hope you don’t mind me hanging around, Chihiro!”

“N-not at all...but you’ve been coming here more often, Kasamatsu?”

“I had an editorial meeting earlier,” she cheerfully replied, not noticing Chihiro’s dubious expression, “so I stopped by before going home. Ms. Yamagata said my writing and characters read as way more alive than before! I owe my big bro Itsuki for that big-time!”

At the term *big bro*, Chihiro looked even more dubious.

“Ha-ha-ha! Keep up the good work, Aoba,” the boundlessly joyful Itsuki said. “...Oh right, I finished reading your novel a little bit ago, but...yeah, I think the influence Kanikou had on you is a little *too* front and center. But your writing’s nice, and you keep a good pace going with the story events. I enjoyed it from start to finish.”

Despite the praise, Aoba's face suddenly clouded. "Thank you very much, Big Bro. Online, though, it's still getting slammed. All those one-star Amazon reviews..."

"Pfft! Those one-star reviewers all have brains the size of hermit crabs, so quit paying attention to them. Besides, when you post a review in public, it's not the book or its author being judged—it's the intelligence, opinions, and sensibility of the reviewer. And if these sham reviewers don't understand that, then why bother letting them take over your mind, huh? So forget those idiots. You got the guarantee of an honest-to-God genius—you *do* have talent. So quit wavering and keep pushing forward!"

As always, Itsuki was talking to himself as much as to her—but it still left a deep impression on Aoba.

"I will! I'll do my best, Big Bro!"

She proceeded to show Itsuki the results of that day's editorial meeting—the plot summary and opening to her second novel. She was opting to create a brand-new work instead of writing a second volume for *Memories of the Sky*, and she wanted his advice.

Itsuki, of course, gave her the most sincere guidance he could. And Aoba listened—but she didn't just meekly accept it. She followed up on it, asking questions until she was convinced, and if she disagreed with him, she said so.

It was an honest, frank exchange between two professional writers, and there was no room for Chihiro to join in. She sulked about this as she prepared dinner for the three of them.



Once everything was ready, the trio were seated around the *kotatsu*. Chihiro took this chance to delicately bring up the topic.

"Um... Itsuki, starting tomorrow, I'm not gonna be able to stop by here for a while..."

"What?!" Itsuki replied with visible surprise. Chihiro had been "stopping by" for four years now. Even during exam time, she still made at least one visit per week. The news was therefore rather shocking.

"...Something happen?"

"Um... Well, my test scores are kind of dropping, so I just kind of wanna focus on my classes for a little bit..."

This was a lie, what Chihiro was giving to her concerned brother. In fact, she had just decided it was wiser to avoid Itsuki's apartment until she was able to work out matters with Setsuna.

"Oh... Yeah. You're in your last year of high school now, huh? Try

to keep your head above water.”

“S-sure. And I mean, I hope I can work out my schedule so I can come back more regularly real soon, but try to hold down the fort until then, okay?”

“A-all right.” Itsuki nodded, but his eyes were having trouble focusing. The advanced robo-vac would be able to keep up with the cleaning well enough, but he was completely reliant on Chihiro for meals, so frankly, this was cause for concern.

“...I guess I’ll rely on restaurants and convenience stores for a little while,” he muttered.

“Um, Big Bro!” exclaimed Aoba. “If you like, can I come over to cook?!”

“Huh?!” Chihiro half shouted. “You know how to cook?”

“It’s been my job to prep dinner around the house since I was a kid. I’m not that great at it...but I can handle *this* much easy.”

She turned her eyes to Chihiro’s spread laid out on the table.

“Really?!” Itsuki asked, sounding fairly joyous. By the way, that night’s dinner was spaghetti with fava beans, spring cabbage, bacon, and chili flakes, along with pan-fried *nikumaki* asparagus and potatoes, as well as a side of potato salad. None of it was technically challenging, but creating something like this in a cramped kitchen in a short period of time certainly took practice.

“W-wow... Easy, huh...?”

Chihiro gave a polite smile. “W-well, I didn’t go crazy today, what with how little time I had and all...but I usually make better stuff than this, right?!”

“Oh, you do? Wow, you’re a really good cook, Chihiro!”

“Ngh...”

Chihiro had meant to snap back at Aoba a little, but the completely earnest praise made her feel impossibly small.

“Well, I may not be able to live up to your usual standards, but I think I can do better for you than the convenience store, at least! Will you let me cook for you, Big Bro?”

“Sure! I’d love you to!”

“Okay! I’ll do my best for you, Big Bro!”

Aoba was brimming with enthusiasm, and Itsuki was all too willing to let her have a crack. Chihiro visibly frowned but couldn’t say “Actually, never mind, see you tomorrow” at this point. All she could do was keep quiet and accept it.

...If that’s how it is, then I’ve got to work this out with Setsuna as soon as possible. Even if I have to, um, show it...

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

This question's for Nayuta.
What do you like about Itsuki?



Everything!

QUESTION

I wanted to ask Itsuki Hashima:
Which would you like better: a silver-haired
beauty in a nurse's outfit or a silver-haired
beauty in a Chinese-style dress?

I don't like silver-haired beauties...
but I love you... Is that a good
enough answer, Kanikou?



Bsshhh~~~~~///

The Role Model

About a week had passed since Aoba Kasamatsu began cooking at Itsuki's place. She was stopping by every other day, and just like she claimed, she really *was* about as good as Chihiro in the kitchen. Thanks to that, Itsuki could remain fed with tasty, healthful cuisine even without Chihiro, and that let him continue to focus on his work.

But tonight, as they ate together, the doorbell suddenly began to ring wildly.

"Dude! Stop jabbing the doorbell button!"

Itsuki opened the door in a huff to find Nayuta Kani standing there. She was breathing heavily, cheeks flush and beaded with sweat; she must have been running on her way here.

"Wh-what's up, Kanikou? You look like you're in a rush..."

Instead of answering, Nayuta turned her eyes to the ground. Spotting Aoba's shoes there, her face instantly went blank.

"....."

"Uh...Kanikou...?"

"Hnnnnhh!"

Itsuki tried talking to her as she looked at those shoes, but Nayuta flew into a rage as she glared at Itsuki, kicked off her shoes, and stormed inside. Marching into the living room, she started screaming at the befuddled Aoba inside.

"You little thief!!"

"Huh?! What?! Wh-who are you?!"

Aoba looked utterly confused. Nayuta never let magazines or the like publish her photo, and she missed last year's awards ceremony, so Aoba had no idea what she looked like.

"I'm Itsuki's girlfriend!!"

...Nayuta was just at the editorial department, attending a meeting regarding the assorted *Landscape* tie-in projects she was involved in. After it wrapped up, Yamagata took her aside, citing "something I wanted to check on, just in case." Basically, as she put it, the new author Aoba Kasamatsu was coming over to Itsuki Hashima's place regularly as of late, but was she aware of that? Nayuta certainly wasn't, so she promptly ran a footrace straight to Itsuki's door.

"Girlfriend...?"

Thinking over what Nayuta said, Aoba put two and two together—and then shot to her feet, eyebrows arched upward.

“Are...? Are you Nayuta Kani?!”

“Yes,” Nayuta replied, openly hostile.

“Ah, ahh...ahhhh...”

Aoba wasn’t able to form a coherent response. After a few more moments, she was so overcome with emotion that she began to cry.

“Huh? Whoa... Huh?!” Nayuta, unsure what this reaction meant, began to panic.

“I...I wanted to meet you so much. Nayuta Kani...! I—I read your novels, and they meant so much to me...so I started writing... I won a prize...but *hicc...nnggh... Hyaahhhhh!*”

“W-wait! Seriously, what’re you doing?!”

Nayuta looked around, at the end of her rope. This girl was now bawling in front of her.

“Basically,” Itsuki said, “she’s a huge fan of yours, Kanikou.”

Nayuta’s lips trembled a bit, eyes darting between Itsuki and Aoba, as she fruitlessly thought about how to handle this.



Once Aoba settled down a little, she and Itsuki explained things to Nayuta, who seemed less than convinced.

“Hmm... Yes, I know it’ll be hard for you if Chihiro can’t come over for a while...but I’m really not sure about a girl who’s not your lover barging into a man’s place all the time...”

“*You* were barging into this place a good two years before we became a couple,” Itsuki calmly observed.

“I was fated to be your other half the moment I was born,” Nayuta shouted back, “so it’s fine!”

“Don’t worry!” Aoba squeaked out. “I really respect Big Bro Itsuki as a writer and all, but I don’t have any kind of feelings like *that* toward him! And even if something like that *did* develop between us, I’d never try to take your lover from you, Nayuta! I swear my life on it! I’ll give you a written pledge right now if you like! If I ever double-cross Nayuta Kani, I swear I’ll atone for it with my life!”

Nayuta edged a bit away from Aoba, who was completely serious about this. “Y-you don’t need to swear your life on it! And—and why are you calling him ‘Big Bro’?!”

The observation made Itsuki and Aoba exchange looks.

“Um... I made her do it once as a joke, but it actually felt kinda good, so...”

“And I’ve always wanted to call someone Big Bro, so I kind of got

carried away. If you don't like it, Nayuta, I'll quit."

"Please do, thank you!" Nayuta forcefully replied.

"Aw..."

"If you want to be called that," she told the softly groaning Itsuki, "I'll do it instead!"

This made him blush a bit. "Well... I mean, you're my *girlfriend*, not my little sister... It wouldn't feel quite right..."

"Oh really...? No, I suppose not... Ee-hee-hee..."

Itsuki's reaction made Nayuta visibly blush. Aoba looked at them both in awe. Seeing two authors she deeply respected act so intimately filled her with a very pure sort of joy.

"You really *do* love each other...! You make such a great couple. I'm so jealous..."

Nayuta smiled at this. "Nya-ha! I'm glad you see that. All right. I'll give you special permission to call Itsuki Big Bro if you want."

"You will?!" Itsuki exclaimed.

"Nya-ha-ha! Just because you have one or two more little-sister characters around you, that's not going to affect our love at all!"

"Thank you very much! Ahh, I wish I could find the kind of love you two have going..."

"Ee-hee-hee... Love isn't the kind of thing you *find*. It's the kind of thing you *fall into*..."

She certainly didn't invent that quote, but the way Nayuta declared it made Aoba's eyes sparkle all the same.

"Wowww! That's so deep, Nayuta! *So* deep!"

"Hee...hee-hee-hee..." Nayuta triumphantly twitched her nose. "Isn't it?"

"Do—do you use your own love experiences in your work?!"

"Mmmm, I do in a way, but then again, I don't in a way..."

"What's *that* mean?!"

"I mean that you can't write a good novel with experience alone... and you can't do it solely with imagination, either."

"Ahhhh... So deep..."

There was actually nothing deep at all about what Nayuta said, but Aoba was interpreting it far more generously than it deserved.

"Do you mind if I ask you some more about the *Landscape* series?!"

"Ohhh? I dunno... I guess I'm the type who says everything she needs to say in her work, you knowww?"

"*That's* your stance?" chided Itsuki.

"Can you humor me a bit? Please?"

"Well, if you insist... You can go ahead and ask. But not too much, okay?"

"Th-thank you very much! Oh, this is *so* amazing!"

...Nayuta Kani had legions of passionate fans, constantly lauding her as a writing genius. But she never interacted directly with them in autograph sessions or the like, and regardless of what they thought, Itsuki and Yamagata never gave her tons of praise for her work. And even if the anime producer, voice cast, and other people involved with the franchise loved her work, they were all careful to respect her boundaries—it was business, after all.

Before her debut novel got slammed and she met Itsuki and had a change of heart, Aoba wouldn't have given Nayuta all this honest praise. She saw herself as her equal, after all. Now, however, Nayuta Kani wasn't a target to shoot down—she was just a novelist Aoba absolutely loved. And to Nayuta, this was virtually the first time she had ever interacted with a bona fide fan in person like this...and she found it intoxicating.

“Oh, right. Ao, do you want to come to my place after this? I'd like to ask you more about what life as a high school teen is like these days.”

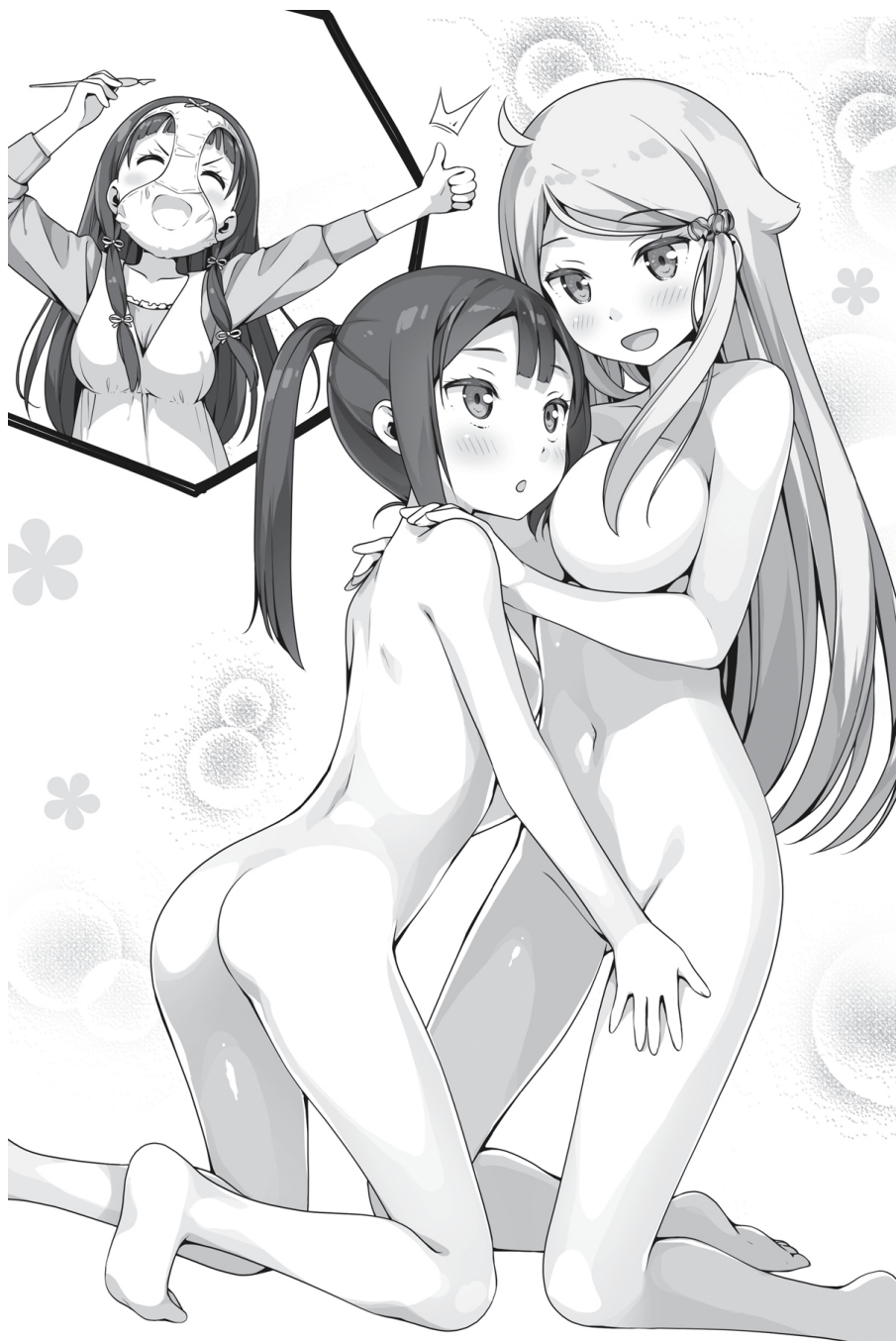
Now Nayuta had fully let Aoba into her life, inviting her to visit as she enjoyed the food she made.

“Your place, Nayuta?! Y-yes! Yes, I'd love to!”

For the utterly grateful Aoba, the answer was obvious.



And so, an hour-ish later, Aoba was nude with Nayuta in her home, having every inch of her body examined. After all, Kaiko Mikuniyama happened to be looking for new models.



Voice Recording

It was a fine day in mid-May, the first day of voice recording for the anime version of *All About My Little Sister*.

They were using the same Tokyo studio as the one Itsuki visited for the drama CD session last November. This being the first session, Itsuki, director Tarui, audio director Takuro Norikura, and producer Oshima all lined up in front of the voice cast to give their greetings, a formality essentially identical to what they did at the drama CD recording.

“All right, let’s test out the cold open and Part A to start.”

After they were done, Norikura gave the signal from the control room, and video began to play on the monitors.

In voice-recording sessions, producers usually carried out audio tests before recording. They’d go through a scene, gauging how each cast member acted, and check to see if they were following the characters’ emotions and directions. After some feedback, they’d then record the actual audio used in the anime.

The script they were using for this session, apart from things like typo fixes, wasn’t terribly different from the screenplay originally submitted; it looked good to Itsuki. That may seem like a given, but it really wasn’t.

In anime, screenplays are used to create storyboards, and storyboards are used to create scripts for voice talent. However, storyboards can and often do change things from the screenplay, usually without the screenwriter’s permission. Sometimes, these alterations were to the point that you almost wondered why professional screenwriters, directors, and series creators spent countless meetings constructing a “final draft” of a show at all. What’s more, even if a storyboard faithfully follows the screenplay, it’s common for it to run too short when cut into episode-sized chunks or for an entire scene to require editing out for time (again, without the screenwriter’s permission).

For *All About*, Hirugano served both as the main story editor and screenwriter for all the episodes. He was on hand today as well, but for a screenwriter who contributed only a few episodes to an anime show, it’s not uncommon to flip on the TV and exclaim “Why is this completely different from the script I submitted?!”

This script, meanwhile, was top class. And although some of the cast needed a little prompting to get up to speed on their characters—it was half a year since they last played them, after all—they were all real talents, and they could no doubt adapt fast.

“...Too bad we only have animatics to record this with...”

Itsuki couldn't help but sigh about it after the test was completed and the audio director headed into the booth.

During a recording session, you generally weren't saying your lines alongside a perfectly animated, full-color video sequence. Instead you had “animatics,” basically animated storyboards. This was black-and-white art, sometimes so sketchy that you needed written names to figure out who the characters were supposed to be, and they'd just be flipping from scene to scene without animating. These scenes were recorded from the storyboards themselves, edited to simulate an episode.

Itsuki recalled that the recordings for *Chevalier of the Absolute World* relied on animatics from episode one forward as well. It only made him feel gloomier.

“It's not rare at all to go with animatics from the first session,” Tarui said, laughing as he picked up on Itsuki's muttered comment. “In fact, it's rarer to have color animation in time for the recordings.”

“Really?” he replied, honest with his anxiety. “Because it strikes me as something you do when the schedule's in really bad shape...”

“I didn't say it wasn't,” the ever-aloof Tarui stated. “But recording off animatics isn't a bad omen in and of itself, no. It lets us create art based off the acting afterward, and if there's a piece of dialogue that won't fit due to something we overlooked, we can adjust the visuals to match the line, rather than vice versa. Once the animation's complete, it's hard to make adjustments after that.”

“Ohhh, right...” Hearing the advantages of this approach calmed Itsuki a little. “And I guess for the voice talent, working with animatics instead of 100 percent complete animation can be easier, huh? Like, they can bring their own interpretation to the acting that way.”

“Yeah, that depends on the individual actor. I mean, schedule or not, though, it's better to have color art to work with than sketches where you can't tell who people are, I think. Mentally speaking, I think we all would've been far more relieved if we at least had art for the first three episodes done before recording.”

“...So this *isn't* a good sign?” Itsuki winced a little. But regardless, recording continued—voices for Part A, testing for Part B, voices for Part B, the “next episode” blurb, and narration for the TV spots. It all went off without a hitch.

Despite Itsuki's anxieties, he had practically nothing to do in here.

He'd just have to count on the hard work of Tarui and the rest of the staff. He said a little prayer for them as he left the studio.



WE TALK TO ALL ABOUT MY LITTLE SISTER CREATOR, ITSUKI HASHIMA!

Interview X Itsuki Hashima

So what do you think is the main attraction of *All About My Little Sister*?

Hashima: ~~The way it's all about little sisters.~~ From the cuteness of the main heroines, Ichika Akatsuki and Yukiko Onizaki, to the boldness and coolness of hero Kazuma and his rival Shingo, we're taking pains to depict the deep bonds between elder brothers and younger sisters.

How are you personally involved with the anime?

Hashima: ~~The first story sequence proposed to me was shit, so I've been showing up at every script meeting, arguing with the director and screenwriter in great detail after this asshole production assistant disappeared, and we had to cut an episode. I also was forced to write the final episode myself.~~

You sound pretty involved. What should fans be looking out for in this anime?

Hashima: ~~I haven't had a chance to see the final animation yet. To be honest, regardless of the content, I'm super anxious about the visuals. However, I hope you'll look forward to seeing Ichika and Kazuma alive and moving around on-screen!~~

I am! I understand that all your work so far has been themed after little sisters, but do you have any yourself?

Hashima: No, I don't.

If you did have a little sister, what type would you like?

Hashima: I'm confident that I could love any little sister, no matter who she is.

Finally, do you have a message for all our readers?

Hashima: ~~To me, this anime adaptation is just another step on my path to glory. I'm gonna continue to evolve, and someday, I'm going to create the ultimate little sister. To all my believers, prepare yourselves! Mwahaha-haaaa! I couldn't have come this far without the support all my readers have given me. I hope you'll tune in to the anime version of All About!~~

Thank you very much.

Chihiro Discusses Her Life

It had been two weeks since Chihiro paused her regular visits to Itsuki's place. Since then, she'd spend about an hour every day lurking around the Gift Publishing neighborhood and the streets, parks, and other areas she ran into Setsuna before, but she never managed to find him. This city was too big, and its population too large, to go searching for someone without any leads—she wasn't even sure Setsuna was in Tokyo at all right now.

Siiiiigh... What am I doing with my time?

She was so helpless that she almost felt some tears forming. So she sat down on a park bench, near where he had joined a cherry-blossom party in the past, and sighed. Two months ago, the cherry trees around here were alive with bright-pink buds; now they were lush with green leaves. Everything was changing. Was struggling *not* to change doomed from the start?

As she gloomily looked at the new leaves, she suddenly heard a voice.

"Chihiro?"

"Hyah?!"

Quickly, she turned around, only to find that Haruto Fuwa was now next to the bench.

"Fuwa..."

"What're you doing around here? I heard you stopped going to Itsuki's place..."

Chihiro gave the concerned-looking Haruto a vague smile. "Um... I kind of went to Itsuki's neighborhood out of habit, and since I was here, I thought I'd take a walk to refresh myself."

"Oh."

It was a pretty strained excuse, but Haruto just smiled instead of pursuing it, sitting down next to Chihiro. "So I hear you've been worried about your school performance?"

"Um, yeah." Chihiro nodded. That wasn't a lie. Her biggest concerns were Setsuna and the chances of him revealing her secret to Itsuki, but it was true that she had concerns about the flagging test scores as well.

"Yeah, well, it's your last year of high school... I'm sure all the college-exam prep must be hard."

“College...,” Chihiro whispered. “Um, Fuwa?”

“Hmm?”

“What do people go to college for...?”

Haruto gave a surprised look. “Ha-ha... I didn’t think *you’d* be the one asking me that, Chihiro.” He gave a light grin, and Chihiro felt like he was picking on her. She frowned a bit.

When Chihiro’s aptitude test scores fell below expectations, and her parents and teachers worried about her, her concerns didn’t fall along the lines of “I’m shocked at these scores” or “I need to work harder” or “I’m worried about college exams.” Her concerns were much more fundamental: “So what if I didn’t score great?” and “What am I even studying for?” She had been a serious student her whole life, considering that the obvious path to take, and had gotten brilliant results. But now, for the first time, Chihiro was having the same concerns any high schooler—any student in middle or elementary school, really—would have. She was trying to find a place for herself.

“What do you want to do going forward, Chihiro?” Haruto asked.

Chihiro thought for a moment. “...I don’t have anything set in mind.”

“Then I think you should go to college and find something you want to do there.”

“Yeah,” Chihiro groaned. “But if I go there without any real goal in mind, isn’t that a waste of time and money?”

“Better watch your mouth,” Haruto said, laughing. “You’d probably hurt the feelings of around four-fifths of college students in Japan if you said that.”

“Yeah, but my brother quit college pretty fast... I mean, if I would only make a halfhearted attempt at college anyway, maybe it’d be better instead to work and make money for myself, like Itsuki does...”

“I hear you. Yeah, if you have someone close to you who’s less traditional, it makes you think, doesn’t it...? So do you want to work straight out of high school?”

“It’s not that I’m really leaning that way...but part of me thinks that’d be better than just following my teachers’ and parents’ instructions and going to more school...”

“Chihiro, I think having a vague desire to get a job is pretty much the same thing as having a vague desire to stay in school.”

The observation came as a shock to Chihiro.

“You...think so?”

“Yeah. Also, unless you’re a writer or some kind of entertainer, then a college grad is always gonna make more money on average than someone with a high school diploma. It gives you more choices on where to work, too. If you don’t see the road ahead quite as clearly as Itsuki does, it’s not a bad thing at all to go to college and see what

happens.” After laying out his opinion, Haruto added with a bit more levity, “...Which, you know, as someone who went to college pretty much as insurance for the future, is just my opinion.”

“...Did you graduate, Fuwa?”

“Eventually, yeah. I heard I’d won my new-writer award in the summer of my last year in high school, but there was no guarantee I could make a career out of it, so I decided to keep going with college. I stopped doing anything with novels entirely until my entrance exams were done with, so I could study.”

“Sounds like you really had it together. Even back then.”

“Nah, I was just a coward,” he said, chiding himself for Chihiro’s compliment. “But once I got in, I started working on my draft of *Chevalier of the Absolute World* again. I joined that tabletop RPG club. I had a lot of fun. And they told me about the *Chevalier* anime while I was still in school, so I didn’t bother looking for another job. I figured I could hack it as a full-time writer. But I still got my diploma.”

There was a hint of nostalgia in Haruto’s voice.

“...Are you finding what you learned in college helpful now?”

“Mmm... Well, the history and German language courses I took as part of my gen-ed requirements did help a bit, but not all that much, no. If I got too worried about how the *real* world works, I wouldn’t be able to write anything, really. Especially not light novels. If anything, the RPGs and team-based monster-hunting games I played help out more with that.”

“Huh. So if that’s true for you as a professional novelist, it has to be even more true for your average guy in an office, doesn’t it?”

“Well, I think some people find jobs that really let them use their majors, but... Yeah. I bet the vast majority don’t.”

So maybe college is a waste of time...?

Haruto smiled gently as Chihiro thought things over.

“But it was fun.”

“Huh?”

“...It was hard balancing school with writing, and the activities I got involved in...well, some of them really screwed me up. But looking back on it, it really *was* fun. My classes, my clubs, hanging out with my friends...”

“...What does that matter?” whispered the unconvinced Chihiro.

“A lot,” Haruto declared. “I know how serious you are with everything you do, Chihiro. And whether something will help you in the future is important, yeah, but I think it’s fine to choose something based on how fun it is. You’re still young; you’ve got all the time in the world to try something else if you screw up. So I don’t think there’s any need for you to go out of your way to narrow your options... I’m starting to sound like an old man now, aren’t I? *I’m* still

young, too..."

Haruto bashfully snickered a little. Chihiro, meanwhile, processed the words.

"By the way, Chihiro, what are you focused on in school? Arts? Sciences?"

"Science."

"Oh. What made you pick that?"

"...Because they told me it'd help me find a job" was the honest reply. "Also," she softly added, "I'm kind of into robots, so..."

Haruto burst into laughter.

"D-don't laugh at that!" Chihiro protested, her face turning red.

"Sorry, sorry," said Haruto. "But robots are fine! I write fantasy novels, but they're full of robots, so sometimes I wish I'd focused more on science classes, too."

"...But you describe the robots in your novels in such realistic terms. I thought you had more of a scientific background."

The fantasy world of *Chevalier of the Absolute World* featured swords, lances, and other weapons transforming into giant robots. But the post-transformed robots, as well as their armor and other features, trended toward the realistic side, something Chihiro especially enjoyed.

"Yeah, I had to do a lot of research and reading to get that feel going. But there's only so much you can learn by yourself, so sometimes I'd ask friends in an engineering major, or I'd have them connect me to professors in that field. They still help me out sometimes."

"Neat..." Chihiro was impressed.

"So along *those* lines, I guess I *am* glad I went to college." Haruto smiled.

"You know," Chihiro said, contemplating matters, "I think I had too narrow a vision for myself. All I thought about was how a college education would help me. I didn't think about how fun it'd be, or clubs, or the people I'd run into at all."

Haruto gave Chihiro a couple hard pats on the head.

"Ow! Fuwa?!"

"I'm *telling* you, Chihiro, you think about things too seriously. You should take at least half of a cue from your bother. Okay, maybe a quarter of a cue."

"Y-yeah..." Chihiro nodded, blushing, as Haruto's phone began to ring inside his bag.

"Hmm?" Haruto took it out, looked at the screen, and scowled as he started talking. "...Oh? Ahh, yeah, I'm coming home now... No, not yet... Huh? No! God, what a pain in the ass."

Chihiro's eyebrows shot up. This was much cruder than Haruto's

usual manner of speech. From what she could hear, there was a woman on the line.

“Huh? ...All right. All *right*, okay? Don’t blame me if you turn into a pig... Oh, shut up! Don’t yell at me, dumbass! ...Yeah, yeah, I’ll get some cream puffs if they’re sold out... Ugh, fine, geez... Yeah, right, thanks a lot...”

With a monumental sigh, Haruto ended the call.

“Um, what was that...?”

“My sister,” Haruto breathed, rolling his eyes. “This bakery by the rail station has a fancy new roll cake, and she wants me to buy it for her. There’s always a *huge* line at that place...”

...But he was gonna line up anyway.

“You sure get along with her, it sounds like.”

Haruto grimaced. “No way. Not at all. She’s so goddamn selfish. It drives me up the wall, living with her...”

...I’ve never been selfish to my own brother.

Chihiro had never met this sister before, but she was a bit envious.

“Anyway, I better start walking to the station,” Haruto said as he got up.

“Oh, right... Thanks for talking to me. It was really helpful.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “I look forward to your food at Itsuki’s place again soon.”

“Y-yeah... I’ll try to make that happen.”

Chihiro stayed on the park bench for a while after Haruto had gone.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What did Haruto do with that vibrator anyway?



I mixed it in with the family garbage on pickup day. Its long journey is over.

QUESTION

What happened to Haruto posing as gay on social media?



Well, ever since the anime wrapped, I haven't been posting as much on Twitter at all, really. For the most part, it's just been retweets and announcing new releases.

The Job Hunt

“Hey, I’m back...”

During an evening in early June, Miyako had just returned to the apartment she shared with Nayuta and Kaiko, wearing a proper business dress and looking discouraged with life in general.

“Oh, hey there, Myaa!”

Nayuta, playing a game on the large living-room TV (naked), dropped the controller and jogged up to her. She then removed Miyako’s clothing, undergarments and all, as if nothing could be more natural. Thus stripped, Miyako collapsed on the sofa and let out a deep sigh.

“Are you tired, Myaa?”

“Not tired, really...but kind of depressed.”

“The interview didn’t go well?”

“...No,” she curtly replied.

June is the time when major firms across Japan begin to give job offers to college seniors for the next business year. Just like all her classmates, Miyako had begun sending out entry sheets back in March; today marked the first “round one” interview she landed.

This interview was given by a regional bank. As a member of the College of Economics at her school, Miyako had sent out several dozen applications to finance firms, insurance firms, securities firms, and so forth. All the mega-banks turned her down at the document phase, as did most other large, national-level firms apart from the financial outfits.

Miyako’s economics department was classified as “above average” in the scale. Judging by the jobs previous graduates had landed, she knew not to expect famous, brand-name companies to bid against each other for her services. But having over half her cover letters get rejected out of hand was still a major bummer.

Today’s interview was a group session, and the questions were all the kinds of things the job-hunt guides talked about—Why do you want to join our firm? What did you work on while you were in school? What are your strengths?—and so forth. But as all the other candidates gave their answers without hesitation, Miyako just blanked out on several occasions. Looking back, the rest of the pool must’ve been nervous, too, but to her, everyone else was a model candidate.

“What would you describe as your strong points?”

“Y-yes! Um... Well, I think it’s in my optimism and how I’m not timid about anything. I think.”

Miyako recalled how the interviewer smiled at her. She was timid about so much up there. It made her want to scream.

“Which company were you interviewing for?” asked Nayuta, sitting down on the sofa.

“_____ Bank.”

“Oh.” She raised an eyebrow. “Never heard of it.”

“...Well, it’s a regional bank. There’s just one branch in Tokyo.”

“Did you want to be a banker, Myaa? Like Naoki Hanzawa in that TV drama?”

“Not really, no...”

All her college classmates sent entry sheets to banks, so Miyako followed their lead. The whole reason she chose economics in the first place was because, out of the non-hard science degrees, it seemed to give her the best advantage on the job hunt—but now she wondered if she had grown at all since making that choice.

She just kind of went to college; she was just kind of looking for a job. But right now, there *was* something she was interested in.

“It’s funny to imagine you ‘getting back double’ at your mean bank boss and stuff,” Nayuta said offhandedly, “but I really think you’re better suited to editorial.”

“I’m not gonna do any of the stuff on that TV show,” retorted Miyako. “But...I did apply to a few publishers.”

“You did?!” Nayuta exclaimed, eyes shining. “Can you be *my* editor?!”

“No way. I didn’t send an entry sheet to Gift Publishing.”

“Huh?”

Miyako smiled a bit at the disappointed Nayuta as her expression clouded.

When she began to seriously look for work, she conducted a thorough analysis of herself, and it told her that editing was the one thing she wanted to do the most right now. Working in the GF Bunko editorial department was fun, and looking at Toki and the other editors, she knew that, as tough as the job was, they got a lot out of it.

But she still chose not to apply to Gift Publishing. The editors there treated her well, and Godo, the editor in chief, had asked her to go full-time on several occasions. That was exactly why she couldn’t take them up on the offer. She was working part-time at GF Bunko only because she happened to know Itsuki in college, which led to her knowing Toki. Really, Godo wanted her to join them because she was close to Nayuta, not because he appreciated her own talents.

Miyako was sure that, out of the people applying to Gift

Publishing, most of them were more talented than her. They read far more books than she ever had, they loved light novels far more than she did, and they had loads more passion for the publishing industry. Blasting past them and getting hired just because she was friends with a well-known author didn't seem right to her.

I want to achieve something through my own power.

"...Anyway, I got another interview tomorrow, so I better start prepping..."

"Good luck, Myaa," Nayuta casually called as she stood up.



Several days later, Miyako had her first interview with a publisher.

This was a midsize firm, one that also published light novels and manga, including several that she had borrowed from Itsuki to read. She had glossed over their past hits and the series they were pushing the most. In her eyes, she was totally prepared.

She was thus in high spirits as she went to the interview site. The e-mail had said to come in "everyday attire," so she went with a normal dress instead of a business suit. But when she arrived, most of the other applicants had on their finest formal attire.

...It did say "everyday," right...?

So she anxiously sat there until her number was called. The time came, and once again, it was a group interview, with Miyako joining six other soon-to-be college grads in the interview room. The moment she sat down, she locked eyes with the interviewer, a man in late middle age sporting a smartly tailored suit.

He gave what she thought was a scornful look for a moment before speaking.

"...So given the television and comic work we've done in the past, a publisher like ourselves can often have eccentric people working for them. Some people think this means they don't need to have common sense as members of society, but that's really not the case. If we want to create products that are broadly accepted by audiences, you could say that our people—our staff—are expected to have even *more* common sense than usual. And one core, fundamental way this plays out is in one's choice of clothing."

...The interviewer wasn't looking at Miyako, but she could tell he was speaking directly to her.



A few days later.

The next publisher Miyako had applied to produced a number of magazines and such, but its main business was in self-publishing, with authors ponying up the money to get books and so on produced. According to the company website, they had a lot of connections to distributors, allowing them to get your book into stores nationwide and potentially become a bestseller.

The interview room was a tiny, cramped affair, and this time, Miyako was one-on-one with the interviewer. He was a middle-aged man, looking sharp in his ironed suit, and he gave her a friendly smile.

“My name is Miyako Shirakawa. It’s good to meet you.”

“You too! Thank you for coming today,” he softly replied.

The interview began with a few standard questions—what she did at school, what she thought were her strong points. Then the interviewer took three sheets of paper off his clipboard and placed them on the desk. Each one had text on it, apparently part of a novel.

“Ms. Shirakawa, if you were working for our company, which of these three books would you suggest we publish?”

“Oh?”

The unexpected question threw Miyako. She thought for a bit.

“...Can I take a look at them?”

The interviewer smiled. “Well, I’d like to say ‘of course,’ but unfortunately we don’t have a great deal of time, so let me give you some rough guidance. These are excerpts from three books that were brought to our company recently. This one is a finalist from a new-writer contest in the mystery genre. This one is a historical novel that’s already made it past our first round of a contest. And this one is an autobiography.”

“An autobiography? Of whom?”

“The author of this work, of course.”

“Is it someone famous?”

“No. It’s a man in his fifties who’s led a perfectly normal life. It just lists out his boring experiences in detached fashion, and his grammar is fairly atrocious.”

“Huh...?”

Despite her misgivings, Miyako pointed at the mystery excerpt.

“...This one?”

Out of the three provided, this was the clear winner. But the interviewer shook his head. “Nope. That’s not it.”

“What?!”

He flashed an eerie smile at her surprise. “The correct answer is: We publish all of them.”

“Huh? But...”

What would publishing such clearly low-level work do for them...?

“Our business,” the smiling interviewer continued, “is to typeset our customer’s work to look the part, bind and design it well enough, and make it look like a book. We’re helping them *create memories* for themselves.”

“C-create memories...?” she repeated.

“Yes. Good memories. ‘I’m a real writer.’ ‘I published a real, paper book from a real publisher.’”

If a customer paid money to create (what looked like) a fine-looking book and was satisfied with it, there wasn’t any actual problem with that...but Miyako was still dubious.

“...Well, you work with the author to edit the content, right?”

“Our company cherishes the individual style of the author first,” replied the interviewer, friendly and calm. “As a rule, we publish our work exactly as the customer wishes.”

It didn’t strike Miyako that a book lacking the fundamentals of correct grammar counted as “style.”

“As long as our customers can use desktop publishing software, we can make their dreams come true. It’s truly a fun job to have. Would you like to work alongside us, Ms. Shirakawa?”

Miyako gasped. It *did* seem like they were giving her a pretty deep dive into the firm during this interview, and apparently they were already set to hire her. In her entry sheet, she hadn’t written anything about her connections to Nayuta and other pro writers, but she did mention her part-time editing work and familiarity with DTP software, something she picked up from the GF Bunko editors during quieter times at work.

If all they did was take manuscripts and publish them as is, that software was all you really needed. In fact, any professional conscience you had as an editor might actually be an obstacle. No, what they wanted was someone who’d take the text people brought in, fawn over it, and close the sale—and a young woman would be especially attractive for the role.

“.....”

The interviewer gave Miyako a faint smile as she stared at him.

“All right. I think that’s enough for now. Thank you very much for your time.”

“...Thank you.”

So she left the interview room and headed home, profoundly depressed.



The next day, Miyako asked Kirara Yamagata at GF Bunko about the publisher where she'd had an interview. The mere mention made Yamagata wince.

"Oh yeah, they're famous in the publishing industry... Well, infamous, really."

"They are?"

"Yeah. They'll encourage you to self-publish with them, claiming they can get you in bookstores across Japan and make you a famous writer. But all they really do is put one or two copies into a few stores they have special arrangements with, so there's almost zero chance you'll make any money as an author. Plus, the *doujinshi* scene can produce books that look just as high quality as commercial stuff, so if all you want is a book you made yourself, going that direction's way cheaper. I mean, think about it. If your work's really worth national distribution, it could probably also win a new-writer prize somewhere. And even if it can't, you can still self-publish on Amazon or produce an e-book or whatever. If you're not in it for the money, you can even make it into a web novel. Basically, all that place is doing is selling you the false glory of getting a book published in paper form. I heard they're fighting multiple lawsuits, and I bet they're gonna go out of business sometime soon." Her voice was flat and cold. "...But why bring them up out of nowhere, Ms. Shirakawa? You weren't thinking of joining them, were you?"

"Oh, no way. I just saw an ad on the net, so I was wondering about them." Miyako's face tensed up at her concerned colleague.

"Ah... Well, that's good. I'm not really in the business of badmouthing other companies, but I hear that the employees get 'penalties' if they fail to make their quotas. It's a total hellhole to work in. Definitely avoid at all costs, you know?"

"W-www... Yeah, I'll bet," Miyako said, sweating as her soul nearly left her body.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Hey, Itsuki, Elpeo Ple isn't Judau's little sister.
That's Leina!



Well, in *my* mind, Ple's totally a little-sister character, okay? Besides, there's not really a Leina figure, sadly...

QUESTION

I'm a fan of smaller breasts, and my friend humorously accused me of being a lolicon as a result. I think it's silly to make that connection, but I'd like to hear everyone's opinion on that. Also, I am a huge loli fan.



Small breasts and loli are completely different things. Your friend's wrong, let me assure you... And you're free to call yourself a huge loli fan, but please don't become a criminal while you're at it, okay?

The Road She Can See Ahead

It was now late June, approximately three weeks after her first interview, and Miyako's inbox was now loaded with e-mails from companies nationwide calling her Ms. Miyako Shirakawa and wishing her the best of luck in her future endeavors.

For the time being, her ventures into the financial, insurance, and securities fields were essentially failures. She had made it into the second round of interviews with exactly one insurance firm. Over in publishing, she did get an invite to another interview with that self-publishing firm (which would most likely be the last one), but she politely turned it down.

Apart from that firm, and the first one that she flubbed the dress code for, she interviewed for two other publishing outfits—in business attire, of course. However, even before the “best of luck” e-mails came in, she had a hunch they'd probably go nowhere. She had a vague sort of appreciation for the job of editor, but in terms of exactly what kind of book she wanted to create, and what kind of editor she wanted to be, Miyako had no vision. Naturally, this meant the answers she had for her interviews were exactly the kind of pat lines she memorized from the job-hunting guides she read.

She knew what was expected of editors: working with authors to create an original work, supporting authors when times are tough, extracting the talent from authors, making surefire hits out of the titles they work on. She thought they were wonderful—that was no lie—but did that accurately encapsulate the kind of editor she would want to be? She wasn't so sure.

Essentially, she thought, she failed to make it past the first round because the interviewer could tell how transparent her words were.

“Ahhh... I had heard about this, but the job search just totally breaks your heart...” Miyako sighed as she sat nude in the bathroom.

“Myaa,” Kaiko said as she washed Miyako's body, “if you can't find somewhere to work, you should just join me.”

“Ha-ha!” Miyako snickered. “That's crazy. I've never drawn manga before.”

“No. I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about my family.”

“Your family cultivates silkworms, right?”

“That's right. My father said he'd love to have you working for

him.”

Miyako recalled when Kaiko’s father stormed into the editorial department. He acted like a stubborn old man and certainly fumed like one, but there was no denying the fact that he loved his daughter deeply.

“Yeah, but I don’t know a thing about silkworms.”

“Well, most of our income comes from silk mills that we’ve been working with for decades now. We have a set of patents and a factory overseas as well. We’re using the income from that to try to turn around our silkworm-culturing business—it’s been declining the past few years. We’re even coordinating with the government to improve our cultures and develop new production environments. It’s a long road ahead, but Dad always talks about how satisfying the work is for him.”

By the sound of it, Kaiko truly respected her father and his company. But despite that, she still overcame his dead-set resistance and chose the path of a manga artist.

Will I be able to find a job I know is mine, like Kaiko and her dad...?

“...Thank you. If I can’t find anything else no matter what, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Miyako felt safe in saying that for now.



The next day, Miyako saw Toki drinking some coffee in front of a Gift Publishing vending machine, so she decided to ask why he decided to become an editor.

“Well, I started working here part-time during college like you, Miyako, but my current boss and the EIC at the time both wanted me to stay on, so I took them up on the offer.”

“Oh... So was it like: You’ve always loved light novels, so you wanted to get involved in making books?”

“Nah. I didn’t read anything except manga before starting that part-time gig, and I had no interest in publishing whatsoever.”

“Huh?!” The answer surprised Miyako. “So why did you take a job with GF Bunko at all?”

Toki took a sip from his coffee can, eyes staring afar. “...I’m probably gonna embarrass myself when I say this, but is that all right?”

“Oh? Um, sure.”

“Well...I spent college kind of mooching off this woman.”

That was even more embarrassing than Miyako expected. She gave him a hard stare as he waxed nostalgic.

“Once I began college and started living by myself, I got addicted to this old online game—*Final Fantasy XI*, to be exact—and I hit it off with this player who was always on at the same time. So we started hanging out in real life.”

“Wow, that really happens, huh?”

“Yeah. She was a manga artist in her mid-thirties, but at the time, she didn’t have any work and was just playing online games all day. She absolutely refused to tell me the pen name she published with, but all signs indicated that she did pretty well for herself. So eventually my parents found out I wasn’t attending class, and they stopped sending me money. I couldn’t afford rent any longer, so I wound up joining her in this luxury condo setup she had.”

“.....”

“For about a year,” Toki continued, failing to notice Miyako’s cold eyes, “we pretty much just played games and fooled around with each other. But one day, she was basically like ‘I want to draw manga again, so *get out!*’”

Toki made a fist, crushing the empty can.

“I got down on my hands and knees, begging her not to toss me aside. But I couldn’t change her mind. She said that if I wanted to see her again, then I should go become an editor at a top-name publisher or something. I was de facto dropped out of college by that point— isn’t that just the most merciless thing she could’ve said? ...But at the end of it, she almost called the cops on me, so I reluctantly left her condo. After that, I got down on my hands and knees in front of my parents until they started sending me money again, and it was back to living alone in a cheap apartment. One day, I found a magazine that I remembered seeing lying around in her place...and that was *Comic Gifted*. I figured maybe that’s the magazine she drew for, and I was so excited about it that I applied for a part-time job there. That job was already filled by the time I asked about it, though, but I couldn’t give up yet, so I got down on my hands and knees and begged them for *something*. The security guard was just about to haul me out when my boss, Godo—he was the assistant EIC back then—he just happened to roll by. I yelled out at him, and between this and that, I wound up working at GF Bunko...”

It sounded like this was all a vital memory in Toki’s life, but it was frankly kind of pathetic. *He’s sure spent a lot of time on his hands and knees*, reflected Miyako.

“...So did you ever see your ex again? Or...like, if you *did* get into *Gifted*, what were you gonna do then?”

“I dunno.” Toki snickered. “I’m not completely sure what I was thinking back then, really. I’m certain that I didn’t want to get back together with her, though. I still haven’t seen her since. Not even at

any of the publishing parties. I'm not even totally sure she's an artist for *Gifted*. But that's all in the past anyway. It's way better to tap into the sex industry, you know? Keeps you away from trouble later."

He nodded to himself, convinced he made the right choice in life, as he tossed the crushed coffee can in the trash and walked off.

Miyako, extremely unsure what to make of this, thought a bit. The path Toki took to becoming an editor was surprisingly...well, pedestrian. But in her eyes, he was an extremely talented editor now, and she knew the passion he brought to his work.

Maybe how you got your start wasn't such a big deal after all. Whether you got in via a mutual connection or you were hung up about your ex, if you kept plugging away at a job, you might just find that it's the job you were put on planet Earth to do.

Listening to Toki's story lightened Miyako's mood a little...but just then, a few feet away from the vending machine, two people stepped through the doorway. One of them was Satoshi Godo, editor in chief of GF Bunko and clad in a gold-flecked suit that certainly matched his yakuza looks. The other was a wispy-looking lad who couldn't have been past his midteens.

Oh, that guy...

They had spoken for just a bit at the awards ceremony. It was Soma Misaka, one of the honorable-mention winners at the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest. His eyes were bloodshot, perhaps after a bout of crying, and his despondent face was pointed straight at the floor.

"...Speaking as a member of editorial," Godo flatly told him, "I'm disappointed this had to happen."

"....."

Tears fell from Soma's eyes as his shoulders shook. Miyako could hear him sobbing as Godo sighed, face as scary as ever. One look, and it was clear Soma was in serious trouble.

"But...but we've come so far..." Soma's voice was scratchy as he weakly wept.

Unable to restrain herself any longer, Miyako carefully approached.

"Um... What's wrong?"

"None of your business," Godo coldly replied.

Soma lifted his face toward her and frantically wiped it with a sleeve.

"...I've been banished from GF Bunko," he said in his fragile voice, self-deprecating.

"Huh? Uh, banished? What's that mean?"

"...We can't publish any of his future work," her boss said with a look of disgust. "That's what it means."

“What?” This only confused Miyako further. “Uh, you’re Soma Misaka, right? One of the winners last year? You debuted in March.”

“...Yeah.” Soma nodded.

Maken Wars, his debut work, hit stores back in February. She had heard from another editor that the sales weren’t too great.

“Wait, so you’re canceling it after one volume...?”

“...Yes,” Godo replied, “but that’s not all.”

“That’s not all...?”

Godo glanced at Soma for a moment. “Due to lagging sales,” he said in his heavy voice, “his editor told him we wouldn’t be able to publish any more books in the *Maken Wars* series. A few weeks afterward, he started pitching to another company.”

“Pitching?”

“He brought his work to another firm instead of us.”

“...?”

This didn’t mean much to Miyako. Godo sighed. “Have you heard of the term *three-year noncompete*?”

“...No.”

“The custom is that a writer who wins a new-author award can’t work for another company for three years.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it costs a lot of money to hold that contest every year, as you can imagine. It takes money to revise the entries and bring them up to a commercially publishable level. If a new writer debuts with us and immediately hops over to another company, then we’ve wasted both the prize money and the time we’ve spent discovering and raising that writer. Plus, having a rep for shedding new writers fast is bad for both our label *and* our contest.”

“.....”

Putting it like that, the logic made sense to Miyako. It made sense, but...

“...But was that written in the terms for applying to the contest? Like, not being able to write for other labels for three years?”

“...It’s not spelled out, no,” Godo awkwardly said. “It’s the custom.”

“And did you know about this three-year noncompete, Mr. Misaka?”

“...No,” Soma whispered.

Miyako turned back toward Godo.

“Not being aware of it doesn’t exempt you from it,” Godo said. “It’s a matter of common sense.”

“...!”

That made Miyako recall her interviews over the past month. That first publisher, instructing her to come in “everyday attire.” She did

exactly that, and she was lambasted for lacking common sense. She began to see herself in the weeping Soma.

“...Common sense?” Miyako’s voice was shaking. “So in an industry as closed and insular as this, if you break this custom that’s not written out anywhere, it’s one strike and you’re out? Isn’t that crazy?! And yes, I know it’s bad if you’re not up on common knowledge or break the rules or whatever! But if the rule is there, then *tell* him about it! I mean, whatever you accuse him of, if he doesn’t know, he doesn’t know! Don’t just be like ‘Get the picture’ or ‘Figure it out’ or ‘Hit the books’ or whatever! I mean, what do you think we use our mouths and hands for?! This is a *publisher*! It’s a company full of professionals who work with *words*, isn’t it?!”

Miyako gave Godo her emotional tirade with tears in her eyes. He weathered it, face expressionless.

“...You can say what you want, but I’m not changing my mind with Misaka. GF Bunko’s done the same thing to any new writer who broke that in the past. If I treat him as a special case, it’ll set a bad example for other writers.”

Miyako reared back a bit at Godo’s coolheaded glare. “B-but what if...? What if, like, N-Nayuta Kani started pitching ideas to another company?!”

“What...?”

“It’s still been less than three years since *her* debut, hasn’t it? Would you kick her out, too?!”

“What a silly argument,” Godo said, wincing.

“Answer me!”

Godo gave Miyako an irritated sigh. “...All right. Let’s say Kani pitches to another publisher. You know the entire GF Bunko editorial department would do everything they can to stop her. And even if we can’t stop her from publishing something elsewhere, then no, there’s no way we’d cut ties with her.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense!”

“Yes, it does!” a defiant Godo countered. “No matter how much she bends the rules—even if she breaks them—it’s *worth* putting up with Kani. And it’s *not* worth putting up with Misaka. That’s how it is... Excuse me.”

“Wait—!” Miyako tried to stop Godo as he turned around. But:

“...It’s all right.” Soma seemed in better control of his emotions now.

“But...!”

“It’s all right,” he repeated, obviously trying to force a smile through his tears. He made his hands into fists, shoulders shaking, but he still tried to put on a strong face. Miyako had no words for him. “I only went elsewhere because I wasn’t happy with how my editor

treated me. Even if they let me, it would've been super-awkward... Plus, the label I approached turned me down anyway, but I'll try elsewhere. If it doesn't work out, I'll start applying to new-writer contests again."

"Mr. Misaka..." Now the tears were escaping Miyako's eyes.

"...Um, could you tell me your name? I think we met at the ceremony, but...I'm sorry; I don't remember it."

He bowed his head a little in apology.

"Miyako Shirakawa."

Soma gave a calmer smile, no longer trying to act strong. "Thank you very much, Ms. Shirakawa."

"Huh... For what?"

"I'll never forget there's an editor out there who cried for me. I hope I can write a book with you sometime."

The words struck Miyako like lightning. And as she stood there blankly, he said "I better get going" and walked down the hall.



*I'll never forget there's an editor out there who cried for me.
I hope I can write a book with you sometime.*

Soma's words echoed in Miyako's head, over and over.



Two days later, Miyako was interviewing for yet another publisher.

This was a smaller firm, founded by an editor from a large outfit who went indie a year or so back. With his connections, they were publishing new stuff from popular authors and working on assorted anime tie-ins, but they still didn't really have anything they could call a flagship series.

"What kind of editor would you like to be?" the interviewer asked.

Miyako took a breath and looked straight back.

"I want to be an editor who can cry with her authors."

"Oh...? Can you go into more detail?"

"Certainly... When an author is sad because their work got bad reviews, or their series got canceled, or the media tie-ins failed, or something just unfair happened to them, I want to be just as sad as they are. I want to cry with them, get anxious with them...and then, I want to stand back up with them and keep going forward. That's the kind of editor I'd like to be, I think."

Hearing this, the interviewer—still young, maybe around thirty—flashed a slightly mischievous smile.

"You sound pretty green."

"....."

"Generally speaking, an editor has to work not with just one author but several at the same time. Do you think you can come to grips with the sadness of each one and bear it like it's your own? Because that's going to burn you out, sooner or later."

"Well," the undaunted Miyako replied, "an editor might have several writers to deal with, but a writer's only going to have their single editor."

“So you have to bear it all?”

“Yes. I do.” She confidently nodded. “But no matter how sad something is, if we bear it together, that reduces the load by half. And that’ll work. Besides, it’s hardly going to be sadness all the time. We’ll be happy at times, too, and enjoying ourselves... I want to be the kind of editor who can experience all the same feelings as her authors.”

“.....All right. Thank you very much for your time today. We’ll be in contact with you over the next few days.”

“Certainly. Thank you very much.” Miyako stood up and left the room.

“...That’s dangerous,” the male interviewer said to himself.

Her way of thinking leaned far too close into the writer’s mind. As an editor—an employee of the publisher—there were many aspects of the job where she’d have to prioritize the company’s logic over her writers’ feelings. Those ideals of hers were so green, so loose, and so dangerous.

“...But it’s *good*.”

Nobunaga Shirogami, president of Branch Hill Ltd., flashed a gentle yet meaningful smile on his well-proportioned face.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Are you still shaving your head, Mr. Toki?



I'm thinking about keeping it this way for a while. After I first shaved it, I wanted my hair to grow back as soon as possible, but after I got used to it, I decided it's actually pretty comfortable... I don't need to spend a lot of time washing it, and I don't have to worry about bed head in the morning. It's perfect for an editing job where you're always racing against the clock. I'd recommend it to all my colleagues.

QUESTION

Is Kaiko Mikuniyama a fan of *fundoshi* loincloths as well?



Of course!

I Can See Why You Want to Do a Colony Drop on the Whole Industry

As Miyako pondered her life through her gauntlet of interviews, the production of Itsuki's *All About My Little Sister* anime was proceeding well. Or so Itsuki thought, at least. He didn't have a complete grasp on its status; the director and producer only gave him a vague idea during the voice recording sessions. For now, however, none of the main staff was fleeing the company, and episode one was apparently a hair's breadth away from completion.

Those sessions, by the way, were also going well, save one time when a recording got suddenly delayed a week. The video he saw during them was still just animatics, but...

One night in mid-June, at the end of the voice-over session for episode four:

"Um, Director, Mr. Hashima, can I talk to you about something?"

Just as Itsuki and Tarui were leaving the control room, producer Tsutomu Oshima stopped them.

"...What is it?" Itsuki asked, already dreading it.

"...Yeah," Oshima awkwardly replied, "you guessed it; we have a problem. Not a very big one, but..."

"What happened?" Tarui said.

"...We heard back from the network's standards and practices guys."

Before an anime went on the air, the broadcaster naturally checked the content, making sure it didn't have anything they'd get in trouble for showing.

"Apparently, there's one word in episode one they have a problem with."

"They do?" replied Tarui. "What's that?"

"Penis."

"Penis... Yeah, sometimes that doesn't pass," Tarui observed.

Itsuki thought back to episode one's content. They were right. At one point, Ichika Akatsuki *did* have the line:

"Hee-hee... Wow, Big Brother, look how big your penis has gotten..."

Although normally a model student, Ichika had to suck her brother's blood on regular occasions, or else she'd turn into an

insatiable erotic beast who'd want to do X-rated things with anyone around her, regardless of gender. She'd also get lewd just after a blood top-up, and the line above was from one of those scenes.

"Wait, *penis* isn't allowed on the air?"

Tarui nodded at the perplexed Itsuki. "Yeah. Sometimes broadcasters will have us bleep out the whole thing—or just the part of the word that identifies it."

"Wow, like a classified document...?"

Tarui winced. "If this was a comical scene, that'd be one thing, but inserting a bleep in the middle of that..."

"Yeah, right?!"

Itsuki was in firm agreement. This scene was pivotal. Up to this point, Ichika was a serious-minded girl at the head of her class who was outwardly crabby toward her brother, Kazuma—but the moment she tastes his blood, she transforms into a horny monster. It was the core gimmick behind *All About's* plot setup, and this was where viewers got introduced to it for the first time. It was a serious, bewitching scene (or that was the plan anyway). If this got turned into "Hee-hee... Wow, Big Brother, look how big your *BBBBB* has gotten" or "Hee-hee... Wow, Big Brother, look how big your [sound of saucepans crashing in the background]-nis has gotten," it'd wreck the entire atmosphere.

"There's no way we can convince them to air it as is?"

"...Sadly, no," Oshima said, shaking his head.

"But as far as I remember, I'm sure there's been anime that got to say *penis* on TV," the unrelenting Tarui said.

"Oh yeah, there was! About half a year ago, I definitely saw a female character say *penis* without it getting censored!" Itsuki was referring to the anime adaptation of another light novel broadcast last fall, on the same station slated to air *All About*. The memory encouraged him to speak up louder. "I don't get why it's okay for that one, but not for *All About*!"

"The standards and practices guy changed out half a year ago," Tarui flatly replied.

"...Huh?" Itsuki raised his eyebrows, failing to comprehend.

"TV networks don't really have clear guidelines on what's okay to say and what's not. It's left to whoever's doing the checking over there. Plus, all of TV's getting a little stricter with sexual expression compared to half a year ago."

"That..." Itsuki scrunched up his face, his voice ragged. "I can't let our work go to waste for something so pointless and vague! Right at the climax, too! If they can't air it, tell us *before* now, dammit!"

"...Do you think you could negotiate with the channel one more time about this, Mr. Oshima?"

Oshima shook his head at Tarui. “Unfortunately, based on my experience, a network’s never going to overturn their decision. In fact, if we harp on it too much, they may start keeping their eye on us and get even stricter with future episodes.”

“Those bastards,” Itsuki spat out.

“...Well, the broadcasters need their licenses from the government to stay in business. If they show something that causes a problem, that can put their license under threat. You can’t blame them for being a little more sensitive than other media.”

Oshima’s flat tone further enraged Itsuki.

“But, Mr. Oshima, how can you be so calm? We’re seeing this absolutely vital scene get completely wrecked, and you’re acting like it doesn’t affect us! If you’re not a creator, I guess you don’t understand the pain of watching people walk all over your creative work!”

“I-Itsuki, that’s going too far...”

Toki finally stepped in and gave his emotionally impassioned author a warning before he went off on the team too much.

“If that is the case, feel free to try to educate the public at large about that.”

It was with a low, anger-laden voice that Oshima spoke, sounding a bit like Char Aznable in his pilot’s seat.

“Wh-what?” Itsuki asked, faltering against Oshima’s inscrutable pressure.

“...Excuse me,” he replied, clearing his throat. “Compared to media like books and video games, the medium of television provides fewer hurdles to viewers, but that also makes it very likely you’ll be watched by completely hopeless idiots. If they turn on the TV and something suggestive appears on the screen, they won’t care about the context that comes before or after it. They won’t care if the creators didn’t *mean* for it to be immoral or racist. The lizard part of their brains will attack it, and they’ll complain to the entire world about it. There’s *tons* of them. And since most TV channels live off their sponsors, they’re extremely weak against viewer complaints... These jobless fools, just flipping through the channels, looking for something to whine about to kill time... That’s the kind of absurd conditions broadcasters are exposed to every single moment. I heard this from a friend of mine who works for a network...but if television’s the king of media, then it’s also a slave to the idle public. I’m sure you all understand that broadcasters aren’t *looking* for reasons to censor their own free speech. Who would ever go out of their way to lower the quality of their own productions?”

His words bore the weight of a veteran who had stood at the

boundary between TV networks and creators for many years. Working directly with them, he knew that everybody at the network, just like himself, had pride as professionals and personal conflicts with what their jobs sometimes entailed. That was why he couldn't paint them all as villains.

"The king of media and a slave to the public..."

Itsuki reflected on Oshima's words, then thought of something to ask.

"...But words besides *penis* are all right? Like, you reminded me with the word *slave*, but at one point Ichika *literally* says 'Make me your slave bitch, Big Bro.' That's beyond misogynistic, and from a historical perspective, the word *slave* probably isn't something you should bandy around like that."

"They didn't complain about *slave bitch*."

Itsuki was feeling drained. "...But a penis is just the name of body part, isn't it? So their logic is to breeze right past *slave bitch* but censor something that *half the human race* has on them...?"

"That's why I'm saying there's no logic to it," the lifeless-looking Oshima replied. "All that matters is whether viewers would see it as a problem. And a lot of people have more of a problem with reproductive activity than tragic murders and enslavement...or at least, that's the conventional wisdom. That's how it is... If you could logically predict how everyone who might potentially turn on the TV would react, you wouldn't need to have standards like these..."

"Well," interjected Tarui, "if we know we can't get away with *penis*, how about we think about what we'll do about it?"

"What we'll do?" responded Itsuki.

"First, we could follow the broadcaster's instructions, overlay some sound on the word, and take it out for the disc release. It'll ruin what's supposed to be a serious scene for the TV broadcast, but for those who like the show enough to buy a box set, they'll be able to view the scene just as the creators intended it."

Tarui paused a moment before continuing.

"Second, we can record another line and replace *penis* with something else. For example, like, 'Wow, Big Brother, look how big you are down there,' or 'Look how big your wiener is.' That'll keep the scene from being totally wrecked, but it'll reduce the impact a bit."

"So either we retreat on the TV version or we switch to some non-censored word?"

"Right." Tarui nodded. "I'd like you to make the choice, Mr. Hashima. I know 'Look how big your penis has gotten' is one of the most important lines of the novel series, so I think you need to be the one who decides."

Itsuki silently considered his options. He ultimately spent about

fifteen minutes doing so before coming to a conclusion.

“...Let’s change the line.”

In terms of what’d satisfy him personally the most, the first option was the clear winner. But:

“...A lot of *All About* readers are on the younger side, so I think a pretty big percentage of them won’t have the money to buy the Blu-rays. Plus...I can’t show a completely censored scene to all the readers looking forward to the anime.”

So he took the path that’d allow the largest amount of his reading audience to enjoy it as much as possible.

Frankly, he didn’t know if it was the correct decision. The more hardcore fans might post stuff like “If you’re gonna water down the content, don’t bother making the anime at all!” That was the exact group of people who’d shell out for the box sets as well.

“...All right.” Tarui nodded. “Let’s go with that.”

Oshima voiced no opposition.

This would be far from the first time that the *All About* anime production was stymied by censorship, including sex and violence issues—but sadly, this wasn’t a rare thing in television.

Congrats

As Miyako was freaking out about her career, and Itsuki feared the worst for his anime, Chihiro also had a crisis to deal with. It was now mid-June, over a month since she began the search for Setsuna Ena, but she still hadn't turned up anything, which meant she still couldn't visit Itsuki's apartment.

"You've been eating dinner here all the time lately," her mother said at the table, looking concerned. "Is there something up between you and Itsuki?"

She couldn't be blamed. Up to now, Chihiro ate at her brother's place once every three days.

"N-no, everything's fine. It's nothing like that."

"No?"

Chihiro's smiling response seemed to make her mother even more anxious.

Mom's name was Natsume Hashima, and back when she was eighteen, she had defied her parents to marry Dad—Chihiro's actual father, that is. Sadly, said father died in an auto accident not long after the marriage. But Natsume never went back to her own family, not even when she gave birth to Chihiro a little while later; she ultimately raised her as a single mother. Five years ago, she married Itsuki's father, Keisuke, after getting to know him at the store she worked at, and she was now a full-time homemaker.

Natsume had tried to be friendly with Itsuki, but given that he refused to interact with his family between their marriage and his leaving the house, there was naturally something of a gulf between them. As a stepmother, it saddened her. She hoped that Itsuki could make up with his biological father first, then start treating her as more of a mother figure. That would make them a complete family, more or less, and she knew Chihiro wanted only that.

She mulled over this as they ate dinner...

"...!" Then, suddenly, Natsume clutched her midsection and yelped a bit.

"Mom?!"

She smiled warmly at the concerned Chihiro. "I-I'm okay. Just a little stomachache," she said as she took a few deep breaths, still looking pained. "I've felt a little fatigued lately, so I had a hunch

about this, but the way this feels...”

“Mom?”

“...Chihiro, we need to go to the hospital.”

“The hospital?! Wh-where in the hospital?!”

Natsume smiled at the panicking Chihiro. “Maternity.”



Just as she suspected, Natsume Hashima was pregnant.

As soon as Chihiro called him, Keisuke went right over to the hospital. When he received the news, he looked completely befuddled for a moment—then, slowly, a soft smile came across his face.

“She is...?”

That was all he said. But it was still the first time Chihiro had ever seen her dour-faced stepfather look *this* affectionate over anything.

“Wow. Is that all you can say?”

The words were chiding, but Natsume’s expression was just as filled with happiness as Keisuke’s. They embraced each other, with Chihiro looking on a short distance away in the exam room.

...A new life between Mom and Dad.

...I’m going to have a little brother...or a little sister.

...And Itsuki’s going to have a real one of his own, too.

She should have been delighted about that, but the news clouded her heart. Aoba Kasamatsu and Nadeshiko Kiso had already done enough to make her foothold in his life unsteady, but this had the potential to send it all tumbling down for good. And losing that place made her anxious enough to want to cry.

What...should I do now?

Her unease was approaching the breaking point.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

For the writers:

Do you Google your own name a lot?



Yep.

I used to, but the anime put so much noise into the results that it got hard to gain useful feedback from it, so I've pretty much stopped.



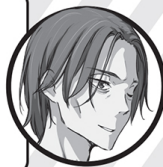
Not at all.

A few times, right after my debut novel came out.



Never again.

I hardly look at any reviews for my own work, but I do collect reviews and feedback for the popular titles I've read and compare them with my own impressions.



The White Box

One day in late June, a single Blu-ray disk landed on Kenjiro Toki's desk at GF Bunko. The white label had ALL ABOUT MY LITTLE SISTER—EPISODE 1 printed on it.

This was the disc containing the complete episode, as passed out to people involved in the project—the white box, to use industry parlance.



Midafternoon the next day, the gang decided to hold an episode-one screening-slash-wrap party at Itsuki's apartment. Toki had already seen the copy sent to editorial, but Itsuki had yet to stick his DVD in a player. Watching it by himself would give him butterflies, to be sure, but he also wanted to watch it alongside all the people who supported him this whole way.

So into his apartment came Kenjiro Toki, Nayuta Kani, Haruto Fuwa, Miyako Shirakawa, Kaiko Mikuniyama, Ashley Ono, and Chihiro Hashima. The latter hadn't paid a visit in a month in a half—"I know you're busy with your studies," Itsuki had said to him, "*but I really, really want you here today.*" He had also invited Aoba Kasamatsu, but she couldn't attend due to some work at home. Hoshiimo, original illustrator for *All About*, lived too far away to come over, and while Itsuki texted Setsuna about the meetup, he didn't get a reply—ignoring his notifications again, probably.

Chihiro had taken the opportunity to outdo himself in the kitchen, filling the table with all sorts of lovely dishes as Itsuki poured beer (juice for the underage Nayuta and Chihiro) into everyone's glasses. The brand was Kansha no Nama Gold, literally *gratitude draft gold*—produced by Sankt Gallen, one of the oldest names in Japan's craft scene. As the name suggested, it was meant as a gift for expressing your thanks to other people, and as a beer, it didn't try any fancy stunts. It was a straight-down-the-middle golden ale—not very flashy but still worth drinking.

Once everyone had their pours, Itsuki put down the bottle and

addressed the crowd.

“Well, we had a lot of trouble along the way, but we’ve finally managed to put episode one in the books! My novels never would have made it this far without everyone here, so thank you all very, very much!”

“Wow, Itsuki.” Miyako laughed. “Actually being sincere for a change?”

“Yeah, really,” Toki added. “I wish you were like this all the time.”

“Sh-shut up!” The red-faced Itsuki took a moment to clear his throat. “Anyway! Thanks for everything, guys, and I hope I can keep relying on you! Cheers!”

Everyone clinked their glasses as they all kicked off the party.



Once lunch was over, and everyone was feeling a little inebriated, it was time to put the white box in the player. Ever so timidly, Itsuki removed the disc from the plastic case and slowly, carefully, inserted it into his Blu-ray player. Turning the TV on, he pressed the “Play” button on his remote.

In another few moments, the *All About My Little Sister* anime began to play with the time code numbers ticking off the frames on the top of the screen.

“Here we go...” Itsuki looked intensely nervous as he focused on the screen with everyone.

The first thing they saw was an external view of Kazuma and Ichika’s school. The camera inched toward the building, revealing a shot of a classroom interior. There was Ichika, breezily solving a complex problem on the board and basking in the cheers of her classmates. And there, in the classroom one floor above, was Kazuma getting yelled at for dozing off—the classic brother-sister juxtaposition.

Itsuki had already looked at and approved the anime character designs, but it was the first time he got to see the Akatsuki siblings moving around. They weren’t an exact match for Hoshiimo’s novel illustrations, but all of Kazuma’s and Ichika’s core traits survived the transition to the anime design—and here they were now, moving and talking and everything.

It was a typical slice-of-life scene, but something about it made Itsuki’s heart soar. And Haruto, noticing his laser focus on the screen in front of him, couldn’t help but sigh a little.



The episode concluded, the ending sequence and the next-episode preview played, and after a few more seconds of black, the disk stopped. But Itsuki kept looking at the screen as everyone's eyes naturally drifted toward him.

After a few more moments, he finally blurted out:

“...Yeah.”

He gave himself a short nod, then turned to the others.

“I think that was pretty good,” he said—hesitantly, shyly, but with a smile in his eyes.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

The quality level on episode one of *All About My Little Sister* wasn't “incredible”—nobody would say that. One could name several series that had better visuals overall, as well as stronger action scenes and more compelling sex scenes. But it was still something Itsuki, the creator, could look at and say, “Yes, this is absolutely *All About My Little Sister*.” Ichika and Yukiko were cute, and Kazuma and Shingo acted all studly and cool. The action scenes didn't exactly go overboard on the frame count, but they were carefully designed to avoid simplicity—and with the more “adult” scenes, Ichika was depicted nude in a way that you'd *think* you could see it all but just *barely* couldn't.

There were some disappointing elements. The line about “how big your penis has gotten” was changed to “how big you are under the belt,” and scenes with a lot of characters definitely suffered in the visual department. But Itsuki could still confidently declare that this—yes, *this*—was truly the *All About My Little Sister* anime. Considering how this was a last-minute replacement for a failed anime project, the people involved kept clashing with one another, the production schedule was ridiculously tight, and there was absolutely a chance it'd turn into *Chevalier of the Absolute World* all over again, it was safe to say this was the best-case scenario.

Itsuki, alongside Tarui, Hirugano, and the rest of the anime staff, had struggled mightily to make this happen...and now, here it was.

...So *this is what getting an anime is like.*

This sense of achievement.

This sense of euphoria.

This excitement, as if his future was suddenly wide open.

This overwhelming sense of omnipotence, as if he could go all the way to the end of the universe.

Itsuki had similar feelings at the end of each novel he wrote, but he had never felt anything *this* intense since, probably, his new-writer prize.

Toki telling him about the anime adaptation. The manga version. Meeting Kaiko Mikuniyama. Meeting the staff for the first time. The script meetings. The cast audition. The drama CD recording. The anime announcement getting leaked. All the sudden emergencies. Screenwriting the final episode. The anime voice recordings...

All these anime-related experiences flashed before his eyes, and now he could feel them like they were his own flesh and blood. When characters level up after earning enough experience in an RPG, *this* is what it must feel like, he thought. All that accumulated experience, suddenly bursting forth and blooming.

Itsuki Hashima gained a level!

“Let’s get the All About anime moving as fast as we can. No matter how it turns out, it’s gonna be an experience I’d never have otherwise, I think. I wanna see what Haruto saw. What a certain someone else saw. I gotta see it.”

Now he knew, on that day he gave the okay for the anime project, he hadn’t made the wrong decision.

I’m gonna keep going. I’m gonna go higher and higher. And someday, I’ll be standing in the same realm as Nayuta Kani...

“Yeahhhh... That was good!”

Flush with emotion, Itsuki whispered it to himself once more—a single warm tear running down from each eye.



Chronica Chronicle—The Final Chapter: The Seeds of Explosions

After the screening was over, Kaiko left, citing work she needed to do.

“Must be tough to have an ongoing manga,” observed Nayuta. “So what do you guys want to play?”

Haruto snickered at Nayuta, always ready to start a game.

“Well, since we’re all here in the daytime, I actually prepped for an RPG session...but our players are pretty much locked in as Itsuki, Miyako, Nayu, and Chihiro, so...”

He glanced at Ashley and Toki.

Haruto, Itsuki, Nayuta, Miyako, and Chihiro had enjoyed a few sessions of the RPG Haruto created by now, but since the story had been developing over three separate play dates, it’d be hard to squeeze anybody new in there.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” Toki said. “I’ll just enjoy some beer and watch you guys. I sat in on one of my authors when he participated in an RPG replay book, so even watching is good enough for me.”

“Ahh, so you’re kicking me out of the friend group, Haruto?”

Haruto tensed up at Ashley’s teasing. “Well, would you like to join as a player, Ashley?”

“Huh? I was just trying to annoy you, but are you sure?”

“Actually, the party’s currently split up in the storyline, so I think it’ll be fine.”

“Really? Well, by all means, then.”

“Do you have any tabletop RPG experience, by the way?”

“No, but I know the basic idea. I’ve heard from other writers that it’s a lot of fun, so I was hoping to try it out sometime.” Ashley smiled, perhaps recalling fond memories.

“Okay, since we have a new player here, and we haven’t had a session in a while, let’s review what’s been happening.”

Haruto passed out his character sheets to the team, referring to his gamemaster documentation as he explained the plot.

“So the game takes place in Chronica, a land of swords and sorcery. It’s home to several countries, and there’s conflict smoldering across the land. Our original four players are princesses from the

Kingdom of Midfield, fleeing from a power struggle there—Miyako Shirakawa plays Miyako Midfield, Itsuki Hashima plays Tsukiko Midfield, Chihiro Hashima plays Sen Midfield, and Nayuta Kani plays Deathmask Midfield. They're now a band of adventurers away from their homeland, and in the rural western Kingdom of Gagagia, they've been caught up in a conspiracy that's gripping the whole country. Along the way, they discover that the military empire of Horn River has its feelers across the entire continent. That's chapter one."

"...Wow," snickered Toki as he looked at the map and listened to Haruto. "This is hilarious."

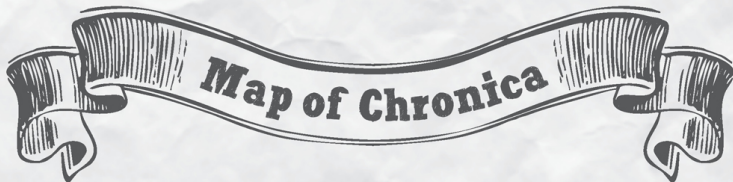
"Oh?" Haruto replied, still breezily smiling. "What is? This game is a work of fiction and bears no resemblance to actual organizations or publishers."

"Oh... It doesn't?"

Sensing that he was prodding a darker part of Haruto's psyche, Toki refrained from diving in any further. He glanced at Chihiro.

"...If it's four sisters, then Chihiro's playing a girl, too?"

"Um, yeah. I'm the second youngest of them, so I'm a little sister to Itsuki... I mean, Tsukiko."



The odd way Chihiro's voice cracked made Toki sweat a bit.

In the past, Setsuna had sketched the "girl with the ass of the millennium" for him, which had alerted him to the fact that Chihiro was a girl. Well, he wasn't technically 100 percent sure of that yet, but if he imagined that Itsuki's brother might in fact be his sister, he suddenly realized that Chihiro's voice was just as high-pitched as when they first met, despite being in the last year of high school. Now Chihiro being a man was just *weird*.

"Thus," Haruto continued, "hoping to gain the power to fight the empire of Horn River at some point, the four sisters run into a woman named Nina at a tavern, a powerful ex-knight who agrees to train them. They spend many grueling yet exciting days with her—but one day, Nina is attacked by Horn River assassins. It turns out Nina used to be a general in the empire, and while they successfully beat away the assailants, Tsukiko is killed trying to defend Nina. Shocked over the loss of her big sister, Deathmask wanders away to parts unknown, while Miyako and Sen set off on a journey to find a way to resurrect Tsukiko. That's how chapter two ends."

"...Why did you get yourself killed defending an NPC?" Toki asked Itsuki.

"Nina has a sister seven years younger than her who she's been separated from. NPC or not, I can't do anything that would devastate a little-sister character."

"Yeah, so you devastated your *own* sisters instead," Haruto rightly pointed out. "Anyway, in chapter three, Miyako and Sen learn of the Narow tribe, superpowered beings who possess secret necromancy spells. They navigate the Elcadia Mountains to reach them, populated with all kinds of powerful monsters, but soon make contact with an Overlord type of person who sends them to the land of the dead. After successfully rescuing Tsukiko, the three of them flee from the land, but during the few hours they were down there, three years have passed in the surface world. Great changes have occurred. The Principality of Lightning, once affiliated with Horn River, suddenly hoists the flag of rebellion against the empire, conquering their cities one by one and rapidly expanding their territory. In tandem with Lightning's advance, the other nations under threat of imperial invasion begin waging wars of their own. It turns out Deathmask is behind all this, using her sexual techniques and charismatic wiles to infiltrate Lightning and make its government do her bidding..."

"Ohhh, right! Now I remember! What are you doing, Deathmask?" This was enough to jog Miyako's memory.

Nayuta responded with an evil laugh. "Hee-hee-hee! The world took Tsukiko from me—I'm going to destroy it and start a new era of

rule as its one and only demon king!”

“Right, so Deathmask has done a face-heel turn, and it’s our job to kill her?”

“Maybe it’ll turn out that way, and maybe it won’t,” Haruto said to Chihiro, trying to keep it vague.

“Like,” interjected Miyako, “is it even possible for players to fight one another? One of them might get killed or something.”

“Well, in a tabletop RPG, it’s up to the players to be the heroes and weave the story. Whether it ends in tragedy, or they fail to achieve whatever goal they had, if that’s what the players did their best to achieve, then it’s a brilliant story and a successful play session. Of course, most gamemasters will try to keep things from going *too* haywire, but here, I’m trying to respect your choices as much as possible.”

(In Volume 1, table RPGs were described as *players assuming roles and trying to reach the end of a scenario alive*, but that wasn’t technically correct. Apologies.)

In Japan, there’s a famous RPG-replay book called *Grancrest Replay: Fantasia Factory*, featuring popular writers as players. In it, Protea, one of the player characters, winds up completely siding with the main villain’s goals and double-crossing the other players, even focusing on skills to defeat the rest of the party during level-up time. It’s said that the writer playing Protea’s journey to the dark side still regrets going “all the way” with it.

“Sisters having to fight each other... It’s so tragic! But honestly, getting to duel one of my former companions gone evil is really exciting...!”

The stage was set between a rom-com writer and an author of battle-oriented fantasies. Itsuki was already shaking a fist.

“Okay, me and Nayu need to discuss a few things in private. While we’re doing that, Ashley, if you could use this sample sheet to create your own character, please...”

Handing the sheet to Ashley, Haruto left the living room with Nayuta.



The two of them came back after about fifteen minutes, just in time for Ashley to finish up her character. It was time for the session to begin.

GM (Haruto): All right, time to create a new story. At a village

located near the base of the Elcadia Mountains, Tsukiko, Miyako, and Sen hear about what Deathmask has been up to. We'll begin there.

Miyako (Miyako): Well, it's pretty clear what we're gonna do. We have to get Deathmask back!

Sen (Chihiro): But Deathmask is some kind of high official in the Principality of Lightning now, isn't she? I dunno if we can meet with her that easily...

Tsukiko (Itsuki): Well, we won't know unless we try! Let's head for Lightning!

Sen: Geez, Big Sis, you always just forge ahead, huh. We still have a lot of info to gather before we can go.

The three of them decided to focus on data gathering at the nearest large town. Fortunately, they were able to meet with an info broker, and from him they hoped to learn Deathmask's current location, how to get there, and what they needed to meet with her.

Tsukiko Midfield

PLAYER Itsuki Hashima AGE 17 GENDER ♀

External characteristics

A fetching, gallant young woman with long black hair.

Background

Second oldest in a group of four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Googling herself

Likes

Shrimp, crabs, etc.

Dislikes

Cut for length.

Parameters

LV: 5 / Max HP: 51 / Max MP: 30 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 18 (4d)
 Spirit: 12 (3d) / Magic: 15 (3d) / Agility: 18 (4d) / Dexterity: 14 (3d)
 Luck: 14 (3d) / Wisdom: 9 (2d) / Charisma: 13 (3d) / Intuition: 15 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 70 / Bludgeoning: 80 / Piercing: 80 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100
 Electrocutation: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 50

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100
 Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Flowing Slash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +8.
 2d+15 cutting damage on a single target.

Horizontal Stab: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +7.
 2d+15 piercing damage on a single target.

Shield Bash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +6.
 1d+12 bludgeoning damage on a single target. Pushes target back 1 square.

Protect: Consumes 0 MP. Takes all damage dealt to characters within two squares.

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.

Breath Shield: Consumes 5 MP. Automatically succeeds. Doubles heat, cold, and lightning resistance for 1 turn.

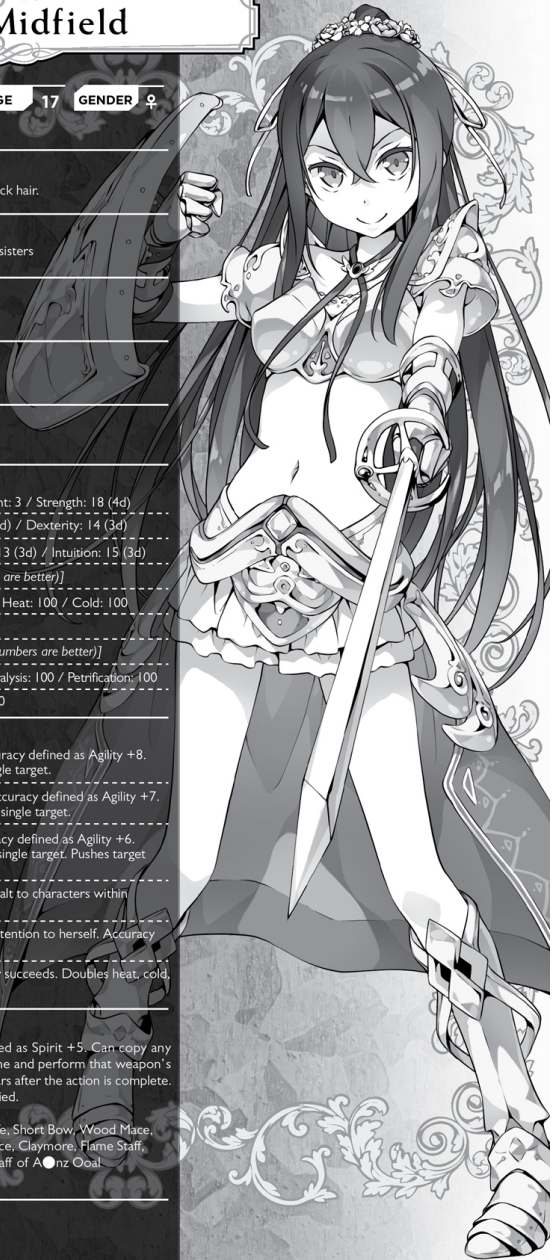
Unique skill

Phantom Smith: Range 10. Accuracy defined as Spirit +5. Can copy any weapon she has seen at least once in the game and perform that weapon's intrinsic actions. The copied weapon disappears after the action is complete. Consumes MP depending on the weapon copied.

Currently copiable weapons: Longsword, Knife, Short Bow, Wood Mace, Club, Orcish Ax, Roper Tentacle, Dragon Lance, Claymore, Flame Staff, Morning Star, Steel Sword, Throwing Knife, Staff of Aoniz Ooal Gown, Zombie Stomach Acid

Inventory

None



Miyako Midfield

PLAYER

Miyako
Shirakawa

AGE

20

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Kind of like Mikoto Misaka

Background

Eldes of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Shopping

Likes

People who try really hard

Dislikes

People who make fun of them for it

Parameters

LV: 5 / Max HP: 28 / Max MP: 50 / Movement: 2 / Strength: 5 (1d)

Spirit: 14 (3d) / Magic: 26 (5d) / Agility: 12 (3d) / Dexterity: 7 (2d)

Luck: 13 (3d) / Wisdom: 24 (5d) / Charisma: 15 (3d) / Intuition: 13 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 80 / Cold: 80

Electrocution: 50 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 80 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Staff Strike: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. 1d+6 bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Fireball: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+13 heat damage to enemies within range.

Ice Needle: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+18 cold/piercing damage to enemies within range.

Energy Bolt: Range 3. Consumes 4 MP. 3d+13 electrocution damage to enemies within range.

Light Wing: Range 1. Consumes 3 MP. Boosts single character's Movement by +2 for 3 turns. Not stackable.

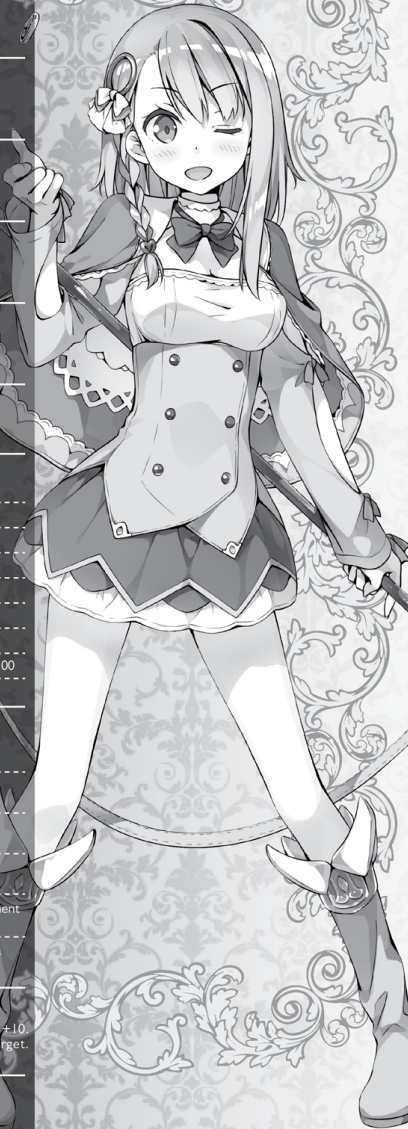
Insulation: Range 2. Consumes 5 MP. Creates a barrier that neutralizes lightning attacks on a single target for one turn.

Unique skill

Thor's Bullet: Range 10. Consumes 15 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +10. 5d+37 piercing/bludgeoning/electrocution damage on a single target. Consumes 1 mithril piece.

Inventory

Magic Potion x2, Mithril Piece x3



Sen Midfield

PLAYER

Chihiro Hashima

AGE

16

GENDER ♀

External characteristics

Kind of girlish? She has a ribbon on.

Background

Second youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Cooking, sports

Likes

Cute things

Dislikes

Liars

Parameters

LV: 5 / Max HP: 33 / Max MP: 27 / Movement: 4 / Strength: 12 (3d)

Spirit: 12 (3d) / Magic: 6 (2d) / Agility: 25 (5d) / Dexterity: 21 (4d)

Luck: 20 (4d) / Wisdom: 13 (3d) / Charisma: 8 (2d) / Intuition: 24 (5d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 80 / Leg Bind: 80

Actions

Arrow: Range 5. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +5. 1d+6 piercing damage on a single target. May consume a corresponding potion to add status ailments to the strike.

Knife: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +10. 1d+18 cutting/piercing damage on a single target. May consume a corresponding potion to add status ailments to the strike.

Unlocks: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Opens the locks on doors and treasure chests.

Detect Trap: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Intuition +5. Discovers traps before they are set off.

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.

Cooking: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Cooks any food items in inventory.

Compounding: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Combines ingredient items to create potions.

Unique skill:

Jaldabaoth: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3. Cancels all magic touched by her hand, whether attack or healing types. Automatically destroys any magical items touched.

Inventory

Penicillin x5, Poison Potion x3, Sleep Potion x2, Rations x3



GM: “Hee-hee-hee! Oh, I can tell you, all right, but not for free! You three are quite the fetching ladies, I see, but if you let me spend the night with you all, I’ll be happy to spill the beans.”

Miyako: Ew! No way!

Sen: Can we maybe bargain with him a little?

GM: Okay, can all three of you roll for Charisma?

Tsukiko: I got three dice for that, so...    Nine.

Miyako: Me too...    Ten.

Sen: My Charisma’s pretty low, so just two dice...   That’s an eight.

GM: Mmm, sorry. The three of you tried to convince the information broker, but you couldn’t change his mind. “Ee-hee-hee! Don’t worry. I’ll be so nice to the three of you...”

Miyako: ...! What a freak!

Tsukiko: That’s it! Let’s beat the info out of him!

Sen: I don’t like violence, but if it’ll help us with our mission, so be it...

GM: “You, you wanna go?! Hey, you guys! Teach these ladies a lesson!”

“One moment.”

Just as battle was about to ensue with the seasoned bodyguards the broker hired, a mysterious, beautiful woman suddenly entered the business. She was tall and well-endowed with blond hair, and she had an overwhelming charm that could compel anyone, man or woman, to be attracted to her.

This was the player character created by Ashley Ono.

Shuri (Ashley): I am Shuri, a traveling priestess. I’m twenty-three years old, and I’m on a journey to defeat everyone with big breasts besides me. I heard recently that Deathmask, this girl causing trouble worldwide, has huge bazongas, so I’m thinking about taking her out.

Shuri Nemikhoziv

PLAYER Ashley Ono AGE 23 GENDER ♀

External characteristics

Big-breasted and gorgeous

Background

A mysterious beauty questing to defeat any other buxom figures

Hobbies

Messing around with cuties

Likes

Money

Dislikes

Big Boobs

Parameters

LV: 5 / Max HP: 33 / Max MP: 33 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 22 (4d)

Spirit: 24 (5d) / Magic: 12 (3d) / Agility: 12 (3d) / Dexterity: 12 (3d)

Luck: 18 (4d) / Wisdom: 18 (4d) / Charisma: 18 (4d) / Intuition: 13 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 50 / Dark: 50

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 80 / Sleep: 80 / Confusion: 80 / Paralysis: 80 / Petrification: 80

Magic bind: 100 / Arm bind: 100 / Leg bind: 100

Actions

Heal: Range 3. Consumes 2 MP. Automatically succeeds. Heals 1d+17 HP to a single target.

Crowd Heal: Range 3. Consumes 4 MP. Automatically succeeds. Heals 1d+10 HP to allies within range.

Sleep: Range 2. Consumes 3 MP. Accuracy defined as Spirit+5. Applies sleep to a single target.

Poison: Range 3. Consumes 3 MP. Accuracy defined as Magic +5. Applies poison to a single target.

Absorb Spirit: Range 2. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Spirit +5. Sucks 1d worth of MP from a single target.

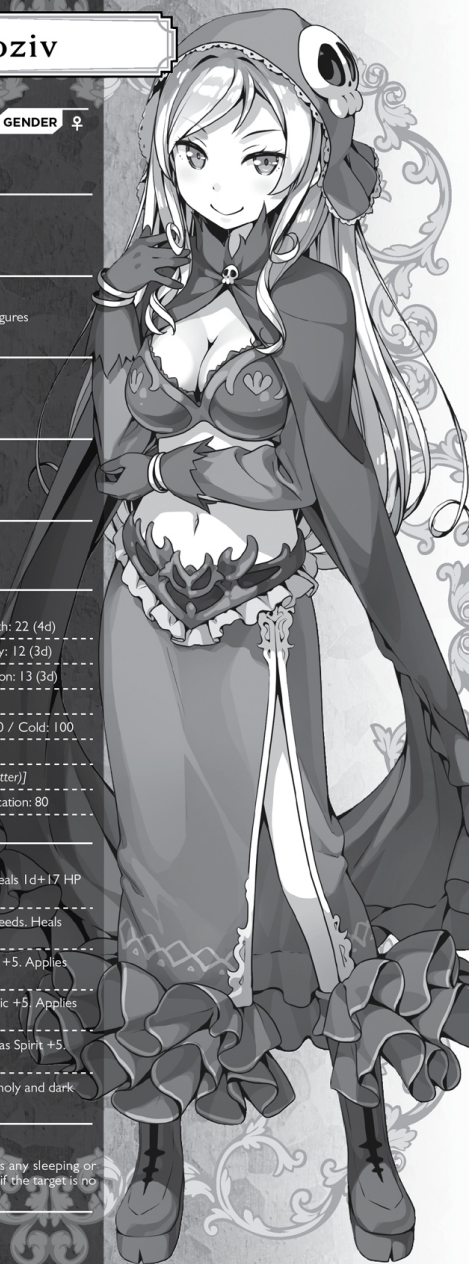
Spirit Wave: Range 3. Consumes 3 MP. Deals Spirit +10 in holy and dark damage to a single target.

Unique skill

Gears of the Succubus: Range 2. Consumes 10 MP. Brings any sleeping or confused target under her control. Automatically canceled if the target is no longer asleep or confused.

Inventory

Magic Potion x5



“Twenty-three...?”

“Big-breasted and gorgeous...?”

Both Chihiro and Itsuki made an odd face, mentally comparing the real Ashley to the character Shuri made.

“S-stop comparing characters to their real players! Part of the fun of RPGs is getting to be someone you aren’t! Besides, you two are playing different genders, even!”

Haruto’s defense made Ashley blush in awkward embarrassment. “Good point,” Itsuki said as Chihiro’s face tensed up.

GM: Anyway, the merchants look pretty awed by this sudden visitor.

Shuri: Hee-hee-hee! If you’ll give me your information, you’ll get to have *this* sexy beauty all to yourself.

GM: “I—I will?! Okay! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you anything!” Shuri and the excited broker disappear into a room at the inn, leaving you behind. What now?

Miyako: What now? Uh...

Sen: Ash...um, Shuri’s pretty lewd...

Tsukiko: For now, I guess we’ll have to wait an evening...

GM: Okay, then I’ll switch the scene over to Shuri... Um, Ashley, you’re sure that you want to engage with this guy in exchange for the information?

Shuri: Of course not. Unlike the sex-starved, big-boobed freaks you see on the street, *my* behavior’s strictly on the up-and-up. First off, I’m going to cast Sleep on the broker.

GM: Got it. He has no resistance to status ailments, so I’ll count you as automatically succeeding. The broker instantly falls into a deep sleep.

Sen: But if he’s asleep, how are you gonna get the info from him...?

Shuri: Now I use my unique skill Gears of the Succubus on the sleeping broker.

Sen: What kind of skill is that?

Shuri: It allows me to command anyone who’s under the Sleep or Confusion ailments.

Tsukiko: Whoa, that’s pretty strong...!

Shuri: Ee-hee-hee... Now, tell me everything you know.

GM: The broker’s eyes remain closed as he begins to speak...

The night passed. When the trio went to meet with Shuri, she asked to join them, freely giving them the information she got from the broker.

“Why are you cooperating with us so much, Ashley? Are you scheming something?”

Ashley flashed the dubious Itsuki a crafty smile. “Hee-hee-hee! I’m

not scheming anything. Any girl with small boobs is an ally to me.”

Her chiding eyes settled upon Chihiro, distressing her greatly.

“Whaa—?! H-heh, A-Ashley!”

“Aha! I see. Yeah, Sen does kind of have a small-boob image in my mind,” said Itsuki.

“Yeah. She’s an archer and a dexterous thief, so I was kind of picturing Sen as the slender type, too,” Haruto added.

The two seemed convinced enough.

Chihiro, sitting up at attention, nodded a few times. “R-right! I’m Sen! I’m a girl with small breasts! Ha-ha-ha!”

She puffed out her chest as she made fun of herself, smiling not entirely convincingly. Ashley stifled a laugh while Toki began sweating profusely.

Regardless...

According to Shuri’s tale, Deathmask was currently at the front lines near the magical city of Spring Tree, a tactically vital point in Horn River, personally commanding her troops as she attempted to capture it. She was extremely well guarded, of course, but after this constant string of battles, the Principality of Lightning’s forces were yearning for any manpower they could find, and mercenaries were a common sight among them. Rumor had it that Deathmask herself gave “rewards” to the strongest of her warriors, earning their absolute loyalty in return. Anyone who exemplified themselves in combat at Spring Tree might be rewarded with a personal audience.

With Shuri joining the party, the four of them headed for Spring Tree.

GM: The magical city of Spring Tree is a large fortress town at the nexus of several highways connecting all the nations. It’s both a trade hub and an important military target. If this city falls, it’s likely that the empire’s neighbors will all descend upon its territory at once. The Lightning forces led by Deathmask have taken up positions surrounding the city, attempting multiple attacks, but the invasion is still held up for now. This is the situation when Tsukiko’s party reaches the Lightning force’s camp. As they approach along the highway, the military guards stop them. “Halt. This road’s closed for now.”

Sen: Um, we saw a help wanted ad for mercenaries?

GM: “Oh? Then come with me.” The soldier guides you to a corner of the camp that’s about as far you can get from the main force, where Deathmask is. Tents dot the landscape as far as the eye can see, with mercenaries clad in all kinds of uniforms drinking, partying, or engaging in a little weapon practice.

Tsukiko: Hmm. They must keep the people they trust the least off to

the side.

GM: “That’s about the size of it. But Lady Deathmask is a generous leader. Make your name known in battle, and she won’t hesitate to reward you...and if you perform a *particularly* amazing feat, she’ll give you the kind of prize anyone would dream of. But you better be ready to risk your lives!” ...After you’re guided to an empty tent, the soldier leaves. You’re free to rest in here for today, or you can go around and chat up the mercenaries. What’ll it be?

Miyako: We need to get more info, don’t we? If we want to excel in this fight, we better find out who we’re up against, or we could get in trouble.

Tsukiko: Wow, a lunkhead like Miyako’s making an intelligent decision?

Miyako: *I’m* a lunkhead?! That’s *you*, remember?! ...But you know, I’ve gone through a lot, too. It’s been a hard job search...

Tsukiko: Uh, yeah... A job, huh? As someone who published his first novel in college—um, I mean, as an ex-princess adventurer, it’s not something I’m well versed in...

The party split up to gather intelligence from the other mercenaries. Based on what they found, the Spring Tree defense force was led by four powerful generals, collectively known as the Four Leaders. Each of them had monster-caliber strength, and they were all fighting on the front lines, dispatching principality soldiers with ease and even eliminating some well-known, hardened warriors. If you took down even one of them, your name would certainly enter Deathmask’s ear.

For now, the group decided to target the Four Leaders. In the meantime, they did some shopping with the merchant caravan, mixed up some new items, and prepared for the fight ahead before falling asleep. The mercenaries received their marching orders early the next morning.

GM: As you prepare to deploy, one of the principality’s soldiers strides up. “This is a magic drug that massively boosts the power of anyone who drinks it. Have a swig before you join the fight.” With that, he hands you a small bottle filled with a strange liquid. Looking around, you see your mercenary companions being given similar bottles.

Tsukiko: Oooh! They have *those* kinda drugs? That’s awesome!

Sen: Whoa, Big Sis! This is way too sketchy!

Miyako: She’s right. No way we can drink this.

GM: All right. Let’s have Miyako roll for Intuition and Sen roll for Wisdom.

Miyako: Oh? Okay... Um, 🎲 🎲 🎲.

Sen: I got .

GM: Oops! That's a crit, Miyako! ...Then, as someone who's gone skin to skin with Deathmask many times in the past, Miyako can tell—this “drug” contains some of Deathmask's own bodily fluids. Thanks to that, during the ensuing battle, the person who drinks it falls under the effects of Lilim's Kiss. And with her medicinal knowledge, Sen can tell that it's purely a power-up item that won't impart any other status effects.

Miyako: Y-yes, Deathmask has powered me up a lot of times, but...

GM: All right. You're free to drink it or not.

“A potion with Deathmask's b-bodily fluids...? It's amazing that it works like Lilim's Kiss on me...”

“Weh-heh-heh! Aw, Tsukikoooo! ♥ Come on and drink it already! Just gulp it down!”

Nayuta smiled leeringly at the reluctant Itsuki.

Shuri: In that case, I'll drink it.

Tsukiko: Mmm... All right! Let's go with it!

Miyako: Well, okay... To be honest, it beats any of the other sexy stuff she'd do to me...

Sen: Hmm... I think I'll pass. It's probably a magic item, isn't it, like a potion? It's going to shatter if I touch it anyway.

GM: So Shuri, Tsukiko, and Miyako each have a drink. Miyako, you can feel the power coursing through your body. Thus, for all three of you, every stat except HP, MP, and Movement will be multiplied by 1.3. Your resistance will double, and you'll automatically get one extra die for any damage roll you take.

“Whoa! The Four Leaders are gonna be a piece of cake now!”

“You said it!”

“Ee-hee-hee! I can't wait to trample all over them.”

The trio were revved up after this extremely charitable boost, while Chihiro watched them celebrate and gave a slightly envious “ah-ha-ha.” Only Haruto noticed the “oh crap” expression of regret Nayuta had as she looked at Chihiro.

So the group set off for battle with the other mercenaries. The orders given to them from Lightning were pretty simple: “Just beat down the foes in front of you.” Given that military precision couldn't be expected with a bunch of hirelings, they must've decided that letting them rampage freely was the best option.

The group proceeded to smash up several imperial soldiers before finally making it to one of the Four Leaders, the “Brimstone General”

Phoenixus. After an extended battle, they successfully took him down.

Miyako: Phew! Finally beat him. That was probably the strongest enemy we've fought yet. Even with Deathmask's power-up, that was such a slog! I wasn't counting the number of turns, but it was at least thirty, right?

Shuri: Ee-hee-hee! Without Tsukiko's Breath Shield, we'd all have been burned to a crisp by that guy's Megido Flame attack.

Tsukiko: Megido Flame... That was one scary skill, yeah. But without your healing, Shuri, we probably would've died just through attrition. And without all those crazy attacks from the powered-up Miyako, we couldn't have knocked down Phoenixus's HP at all. We all earned this one, guys.

Sen:Ugh... I'm sorry I wasn't much use...

Chihiro moped as the other three savored their victory. Unlike that powered-up trio, Sen's attacks did almost nothing against the boss. She tried using her superior agility to serve as a decoy, but fate wasn't smiling on her. Failing to dodge the enemy's attacks, she nearly died several times—in effect, she was deadweight for the team.

Tsukiko: Don't let it get to you, Sen. I'm just glad you're safe. I'm happier about protecting you than winning that one.

Sen: M-my sister...

Miyako: ...It's only with little sisters, isn't it? When you try to act all cool and manly. Or sisterly right now, I guess.

Tsukiko: Hah! Of course! My name is Tsukiko Midfield! A knight in shining armor, ready to protect my little sister from whatever may come!

Sen: Big Sis... I-I'm glad I'm your little sister.

Tsukiko: Fweh?! Uh, sure...heh-heh-heh...

Miyako: What're you blushing for, Tsukiko?

Tsukiko: Sh-shut up, you stupid big sister...

GM: As you quibble with one another, a messenger from the Principality of Lightning shows up. "Thanks to you, we have finally toppled one of the Four Leaders. I am sure it will give us the upper hand in the battle to come. I have been informed by Lady Deathmask that she eagerly wishes to meet you."

Miyako: Finally, we get to see her!

Tsukiko: Boy, talk about a handful of a little sister. Of course, that's what makes her cute, but...

Sen:

GM: The four of you are taken by an ornate carriage, looking very out

of place in a battlefield, to the main camp. In the center of it, you find a large manor, made from concrete using advanced Narow tribal techniques and guarded by a large team of soldiers. A barrier has been conjured over it to block any magical spells. This is where Deathmask apparently lives. When you go inside, your group is greeted by a long line of beautiful maids. As seasoned adventurers, one look is all you need to know that they're a crack team of fighters.

“An army of maids... That's just your fetish, isn't it?” Itsuki complained.

“It... Hey, who asked *you* anyway? Maids are a romantic dream for *any* man!”

After chastising Itsuki somewhat severely, Haruto continued.

GM: “Our master is waiting for you. Right this way, please.” Guided by a maid, you are taken to the audience chamber. Inside, sitting atop what looks like a gaudy, jewel-encrusted throne, you see a single girl.

“Welcome to my chamber, everyone. I am Deathmask Midfield, field marshal of the Principality of Lightning's armed forces...”

Deathmask Midfield

PLAYER

Nayuta Kanl

AGE

10

GENDER ♀

External characteristics

Silver-haired Lolli.

Background

Youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Having sex with big sis Tsukiko

Likes

Sex

Dislikes

Those other guys

Parameters

LV: 5 / Max HP: 35 / Max MP: 36 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 18 (4d)

Spirit: 21 / Magic: 13 (3d) / Agility: 9 (2d) / Dexterity: 12 (3d)

Luck: 14 (3d) / Wisdom: 16 (3d) / Charisma: 30 (6d) / Intuition: 16 (3d)

(Resistances (lower numbers are better))

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 80 / Dark: 80

(Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better))

Poison: 80 / Sleep: 80 / Confusion: 80 / Paralysis: 80 / Petrification: 80

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Mace: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3.
2d+11 bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Heal: Range 3. Consumes 2 MP. Automatically succeeds.
Heals 1d+17 HP on a single target.

Cure Poison: Range 2. Consumes 2 MP. Success defined as Spirit +5.
Eliminates poison effects on a single target.

Holy Light: Range 3. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+13 holy damage on a single target.

Barrier: Range 2. Consumes 4 MP. Covers a single character in a barrier that absorbs up to 18 damage. The barrier's resistances are 100 for all stats.

Unlimited Media Works: Can use all magic in this world without consuming MP.

Unique skill:

Lilim's Kiss: Range 1. Consumes all MP and makes character skip the next turn. Automatically succeeds if target allows it; if not, accuracy defined as Dexterity +0. Strengthens the target via membrane-based contact. For the next 3 turns, all parameters on the target except HP/MP and movement are boosted ×1.3, and all resistances are doubled. Target can use 1 extra die while in effect.

Inventory

Lightning Staff, Angelic Robes, Three-Pronged Tree Crest



The girl's solemn speech suddenly came to a halt. A look of astounded surprise came over her face.

"You... My sisters?! Tsukiko?! And Miyako and Sen?!"

"Hah! Long time no see, Deathmask."

"Sis! Sis!!" Deathmask stood up, throwing herself into Tsukiko's arms. "You were alive the whole time, Tsukiko?!"

"Well, no, not the *whole* time, but Miyako and Sen rescued me from the land of the dead."

"Tsukikoooo..."

Over the past three years, she had gained a few inches in height, her chest more amply endowed than ever. Her eyes were shimmering with joy as she kissed her older sister on the lips.

"Mmph...*smch*... Ngh...*haahh*..."

Tsukiko put up no resistance against Deathmask's tongue, breathing in a heavy, ecstatic trance. Miyako, Sen, and Shuri just stood by and watched for a while.

"G-girls! Get *off* each other already!"

Sen forcefully separated them. A single ribbon of saliva connected their lips.

Miyako: All right, Deathmask, let's all go home together.

Deathmask: Home? Home where?

Miyako: Well, not anywhere in particular...but don't you wanna keep adventuring with us?

Deathmask: Unfortunately, I can't.

Tsukiko: What? What do you mean?

Deathmask: I'm using Lightning to destroy the empire of Horn River so I can get back at them for killing you, Tsukiko.

Miyako: Yeah, but what does that matter now? She's alive!

Deathmask: Once Horn River is annihilated, I'll kill off all the other nations and unite the land under my rule. Then I'll marry Tsukiko, and I'll rule over the world as its rightful leader!

Tsukiko: Snap out of it, Deathmask! That's not what I want to see!

Deathmask: Hee-hee-hee... What *you* want doesn't matter, my sister. I can't stop myself any longer. Up to now, I've killed countless people and sucked the dicks of countless popular writers...um, I mean, countless powerful generals and ministers in Lightning. My soul is now marred by sin and a cloudy-white liquid... If Tsukiko finds out how I clawed my way up to this position, I'm sure she'll scorn me for it. But no matter how much disdain she has for me, there will be no defying me once I rule the world. And then... Hee-hee-hee... Tsukiko will be mine forever...

“...Oh man. She’s just lapping up the tragedy.”

Itsuki stared at the spellbound Nayuta throughout her extended speech.

In the three years since she lost Tsukiko, Deathmask had used every trick in the book to climb to the top of Lightning, never trusting anyone as she fought her lonely battle. Her heart was already in pieces. The sex-starved girl of the past was gone—in its place was an evil sorceress deluded by a deep devotion to love.

Miyako: Well, we’re gonna beat you up until you come with us!

Shuri: Ee-hee-hee... Big boobs really *are* the seeds of evil. Let me take care of her.

Sen: Deathmask, prepare to face your punishment!

Deathmask: Heh-heh-heh... Miyako... Sen... That blond chick I’ve never met before... Are you saying you dare to defy me? Then I won’t bother going easy on you, you know that? All I want in my life is Tsukiko.

Tsukiko: Deathmask... I’m not your plaything!

GM: You all take out your weapons and enter battle formation. Deathmask remains a prudent distance from your team as she picks up a large, impressive-looking staff leaning against the throne. This weapon’s known as the Thunderbolt Staff; it’s one of the three greatest treasures of Lightning, alongside the Angelic Robe and Three-Pronged Tree Crest she’s wearing. Having all three of those equipped at once triggers Angelique Media Works, a ridiculously overpowered skill that lets her cast any existing spell in this world without consuming MP.

Miyako: That's kind of unfair, isn't it?!

GM: That's what the lightning logo...er, coat of arms gets you.

Tsukiko: Ahh, yes, that's what it gets you...

Miyako: That's how it is?!

GM: Even worse, all the maids stationed in the room ready their weapons as well. There's a total of five of them, each wielding something different—a sword, a dagger, an ax, a mop, and a staff.

Sen: Um, is a mop a weapon?

GM: Maids.

Sen: Uh...

GM: Okay, time for battle!

The turn order: Sen, maid (dagger); Tsukiko, maid (sword); Miyako, maid (staff); maid (mop); Shuri, maid (ax); and Deathmask.

Sen began by firing an arrow dipped in sleeping potion toward the staff maid, presumably a magic user. She landed a clean hit, scoring damage.

“Now roll to see if she's asleep.”

Behind his screen, Haruto rolled two ten-sided dice, the sides labeled from zero to nine on each. The result: a five for the tens digit and a nine for the ones digit, for a total of fifty-nine. The staff maid's sleep resistance was seventy, meaning that if Haruto rolled less than seventy, the maid was asleep.

GM: ...*Whump*. The effects of the potion put the staff maid to sleep right on the spot.

Sen: Nice! Okay, Shuri!

Shuri: Roger that.

The maids, Tsukiko, and Miyako each attacked the enemy nearest to them. Now it was Shuri's turn.

“Ee-hee-hee! Gears of the Succubus!”

Her eyes began to eerily glow, and then the sleeping maid (staff) lurched back to her feet. “I...am Lady Shuri's servant,” she intoned, her face blank.

Shuri: And now that girl's mine.

Tsukiko: Great job, Shuri! If we can keep taking over the maids like this...!

Deathmask: I cast the spell All Refresh on the staff maid.

GM: Got it. This spell cancels all status ailments. “Wha—? What

happened to me?!” The staff maid regains consciousness.

Shuri: Wha...?!

Sen: Just take her over again!

This time, Sen fired a paralyzing arrow at the staff maid, freezing her to the spot. Shuri then cast Gears of the Succubus once more, putting the maid under her spell.

“Hmm... This skill’s a pain in the ass,” Deathmask said, pondering to herself. “Maybe I should do that to *you* instead. Paralyze!”

A beam of light shot out from the tip of her staff to Shuri. She attempted to dodge it but failed. The spell paralyzed her, knocking her out of the turn order.

“Nngh...! How could I have lost my freedom...? You’re going to take advantage of my paralysis to play with my assets, aren’t you?”

“Why do you seem like you’re looking forward to it?” Haruto said to the somewhat overly excited Ashley.

Miyako: I have a potion I can use in the next turn!

Tsukiko: All right. But having every magic in the book is a real terror... I’m sure she’s gonna cast something even worse later.

Sen: All right! I’ll use Taunt on Deathmask!

Deathmask: Taunt?

GM: If a Taunt succeeds, your attack will automatically be targeted at Sen. You’ll need to roll to see if it worked, but Sen, say something to rile up Deathmask for me.

Sen: Huh?!

Deathmask: Hee-hee-hee! I can’t wait to see what kind of trash talk good little Sen has for me...

Sen: Um... Okay, how about.....fatty?

Deathmask: Whaaaaaaaaaaaaa—?! I-I’m not fat! I just have big tits, okay?!!

GM: Wow! We haven’t rolled yet, but that was clearly effective!

Tsukiko: ...You *have* been getting a little bit doughy around the stomach...

Miyako: Well, yeah. I mean, when I’m not around, they order pizza pretty much all the time, and at night, they’re always snacking and drinking root beer. Plus, their schedule’s all over the place, and they never work out.

Deathmask: *Gnnnhh*... I never expected you to so deftly break my heart... Sen’s a scarier girl than I thought... Now I know what Chihiro *really* thinks of me all the time.

Sen: W-wait, no! It just sprang into my mind, but I don’t think you’re fat or anything!

Deathmask: Arrgghh! You said it again!

Tsukiko: If you're that sensitive to it, lose some weight, Fattymask.

Deathmask: Daahhh! Not you, too, Itsuki!

GM: Okay, so Sen's rolling for Charisma plus ten against Deathmask's Spirit.

Sen:    plus ten for twenty.

Deathmask: ...     Seventeen.

GM: And the Taunt works. Now you can only pick Sen as your target, Deathmask.

Deathmask: Mnnngghh....!

With Sen's Taunt successful, Tsukiko and the others moved carefully to stay out of magical attack range as they faced off against Deathmask. To keep the maids from targeting Sen, Tsukiko placed a Taunt of her own on the dagger maid. Miyako used her potion to cure Shuri's paralysis, and Shuri then commanded the staff maid to attack the other maids, healing Tsukiko's HP as she did.

"You will be rendered to dust! Ultimate Flare!"

Deathmask, in Taunt mode, launched one of the most powerful attack magics in the game world at Sen. But:

"I will destroy that illusion!"

The magical flames, powerful enough to burn any enemy to ashes, vanished into thin air the moment it hit Sen's hand. Once again, her unique skill Jaldabaoth saved the day by canceling all magic it touched.

"Mmm, no dice, huh...? Isn't that skill way too OP?"

"It comes with a lot of disadvantages," Haruto said with a laugh. "She can't touch a potion, remember, and she can't cancel anything except for magic. But come to think of it, maybe she's the only natural enemy of Deathmask in the room."

"I'm up next!"

Sen fired a paralysis potion-dipped arrow at Deathmask. It landed a hit on her but didn't seem to paralyze much of anything.

"Hee-hee-hee... The Angelic Robe cancels all status ailments!"

"Ah...!"

Deathmask then cast a spell to boost her own stats before swiping at Sen with her Lightning Staff.

"If magic won't work, maybe using this like a club will!"

"Not if I can help it!"

Sen had used a potion she mixed herself to boost her resistance and dexterity. It gave her a slight edge against Deathmask. But as they lobbed blows at each other, the other three kept up the good fight against the maids. It took a while, but in time, they defeated each one of them, save the staff maid under Shuri's control.

Tsukiko: That just leaves you, Deathmask!

Miyako: You need to surrender already. If you do, I'll let you go with a spanking, all right?

Deathmask: Awww... No, I can't take four of you at the same time. I might be up the creek at this point...

Deathmask shrugged. But for some reason, her face belied no concern at all.

"Oh well. I guess I'll have to use the ace up my sleeve."

"Your what?" Sen asked.

Deathmask replied with a creepy laugh as she took up the Three-Pronged Tree Crest hanging from her neck, kissed the seal on it, and gently caressed it.

"...Lilim's Kiss: Overdose!"

A pink light shot out from the trinket, and the next moment:

"Wh-what?! I—I can't move...!"

Tsukiko, Miyako, and Shuri fell to their knees in agony.

"What's wrong, guys?!"

Deathmask sweetly smiled at the agitated Sen.

Deathmask: *This* is the ace up my sleeve. The power of the Three-Pronged Tree Crest has given me a second unique skill, called Lilim's Kiss: Overdose. This lets me freely control anyone who's been subjected to Lilim's Kiss...and by the way, their stats still have the Lilim's Kiss upgrades applied.

Tsukiko: But I haven't had Lilim's Kiss applied to... No! Wait!

Deathmask: Before you went to battle this morning, did you drink an elixir with my bodily fluids in it?

Tsukiko: Ugh! I *knew* I shouldn't have had that...!

Miyako: Is there an antidote or something?!

GM: You'll roll to see whether it wears off every turn...but the odds aren't great, I'll admit.

Deathmask: Hee-hee-hee! It's time to give it up, Sen... As a magician, Miyako's no help against Sen, so I'll just have her strip down and do a dance off to the side, please. Tsukiko and the big-boobed lady... You two attack Sen for me.

Following Deathmask's order, Miyako began doing a nude interpretive dance as Tsukiko and Shuri launched attacks at Sen.

"Nngh... Dodge this, Sen!"

"Sorry, Sen! She's controlling me! I can't help myself!"

Trying her hardest to overcome the spell cast upon her, Tsukiko nonetheless slashed at Sen as Shuri punched away with the strangest

happy expression. Sen used the last of her paralysis potions to freeze Shuri, but she knew Deathmask would cancel that soon enough—but to her surprise, when Deathmask’s turn came up, she did nothing.

“...To tell the truth, I can’t move at all when Lilim’s Kiss: Overdose is active. Protect me, Big Bro! ♥ ”

Nayuta shamelessly draped herself over Itsuki. That, plus the “big bro” bit, made Chihiro deeply uncomfortable.

“G-get off me, Kanikou! I’m supposed to be your big sis Tsukiko right now!”

“Ee-hee-hee... Brother or sister, you can be either one! What’s it really matter?”

“It matters a lot!”

Before he could think about it, Chihiro had raised his voice. It startled Nayuta, who gave him a puzzled look.

“Uh, Chihiro?”

“Oh, no, um... This is a tabletop RPG, y’know, so you gotta stick to your roles, okay?”

“Uh, yeah. True. I’ll be careful.”

She still seemed baffled as she nodded at Chihiro. Once the subject was successfully dropped, the battle continued—Miyako dancing in the buff, Shuri paralyzed and twitching on the ground, and Deathmask completely immobile.

“Hah!”

Sen shot an arrow at Deathmask. It bounced off Tsukiko’s shield; she had been forced to use her Protect skill to block it. As long as Tsukiko was around, Deathmask essentially couldn’t be attacked—but with Sen’s level of strength, it’d be impossible for her to defeat a buffed-out Tsukiko.

There was just one thing left for her to try...

“Please, Big Sis, snap out of it!”

She’d have to hold out until Tsukiko could shake off the spell.

“Sen, I’m sorry... Sen...!”

Looking incredibly pained, Tsukiko ran up to Sen and swung her sword. Being powered up, she packed a mean punch right now—whether that potion boosted Sen’s resistance or not, even the single hit she landed was potentially lethal.

“Nngh...! I—I believe in you, Big Sis...”

Using her penicillin (a medicine made by a doctor in the Narow tribe village. In this game, it’s a cheat item that instantly heals all damage, and Sen can use it since it’s not magic), Sen tried her hardest to resist the onslaught.

“     for eighteen; I dodged it!”

“     for a critical! I dodged it!”

“    —that’s gonna hit. I have four HP left, so I use a

dose of penicillin!”

“ , I dodged it!”

“    , I dodged it!”

“, critical!”

“    , I dodged it!”

“, critical!”

“, dodge failed, three HP left, I use penicillin!”

"Tsukiko lands a critical! Four HP left, I use penicillin!"

“, I dodged it!”

“    , critical!”

“    , I dodged it!”

“, dodge failed, four HP left, I use penicillin...uh...

I'm out of penicillin...!"

“Hee-hee-hee! Looks like you’re at the end of your rope, Sen. Let me compliment you for holding out this long.”

Deathmask gave her an evil smile. Sen's penicillin supply was exhausted; she was wounded from head to toe. If another attack from Tsukiko hit her, she was dead.

“Sen, you gotta dodge this...!”

“I believe in you, Bro...!”

The two of them prayed as hard they could as they rolled. The prayers must've been answered, because Sen rolled two sixes for another crit and a successful dodge.

Next turn:

“Oh, that’s a ninety-seven! Congratulations! Tsukiko finally managed to break Deathmask’s curse.”

Tsukiko cheered at the gamemaster's announcement.

“All riiiiiiiiight! I’m finally sane again!”

“Big Sis... Thank you...”

“Argh! How could my love for you be broken?!”

Deathmask groaned in agony as Sen teared up with joy.

Twisting her body around, Tsukiko pointed her sword at Deathmask. “Now...give it up, Deathmask.”

Her enemy heaved a sigh and lifted her hands up. “Ugghh... I guess it’s over now. *Awwww!* I really wanted to conquer the world, too...”

Unable to move and with no way to win, Deathmask readily surrendered. Miyako continued to dance naked, while Shuri twitched away on the floor.

GM: And the battle's over! Your team has successfully defeated Field Marshal Deathmask.

“Ahh... We did it...”

Sen—or Chihiro, really—teared up as she smiled. Her breathing was ragged, beads of sweat prevalent on her forehead. She really *did* look like she just made it out of a heated battle to the death. Haruto, who had experienced the same rush in his own RPG sessions before, smiled.

“Good work, Chihiro.”

“Yeah, good work,” Itsuki added. “Sen was definitely the hero of that fight.”

“Right,” said Miyako. “All I did was dance to the very end, too... You did really great, Sen.”

“Hee-hee... Thank you very much,” Chihiro said bashfully, and Itsuki smiled.

“You’re the best little sister in the world.”

The praise made Chihiro’s cheeks burn red, almost lifting her heart out of her chest. All the irritation about Aoba’s and Nadeshiko’s presence, the vague concern about her future, and the complex emotions toward her mother’s pregnancy were cleansed. Her mind felt supremely clear again.

“Thanks...Big Bro.”

Nayuta pouted at him a bit. “Don’t you mean Big Sis right now? You told me you needed to stay in character... I’m letting Sen have the win this time, but I promise I’m going to keep Tsukiko all to myself someday.”



Chihiro, now more open to playing along, gave her a haughty laugh. “Hee-hee! There’s no way someone who’s only a sister in the game world could beat a *real* sister.”

The sweat began to pour from Toki’s face anew. Ashley began to quiver, trying her hardest not to burst out laughing.

“Nya-ha-ha! What’re you talking about, Chihiro?”

Nayuta smiled, assuming (as she’d be expected to) that it was a joke.

“*You’re* just a little sister in the game, aren’t you, Chihirooooo?”

“...!”

Chihiro, not realizing how carried away she had gotten, now felt like someone poured a bucket of cold water over her. There was nothing mean about what Nayuta said. It was a perfectly natural riposte—and that’s why it hurt so deeply. Her entire body began to burn. Her brain boiled, making it impossible to think.

She wasn’t just a sister in some game. She wasn’t a little brother at all.

“But...”

But,

“But I really *am* his little sister!!”

Silence fell over the room.

Nayuta stared at her, mouth agape, as did Haruto, Miyako—and Itsuki.

Toki’s face froze entirely, while Ashley continued to convulse. And as she gauged this reaction, Chihiro finally regained control of herself.

...Crap. I said it.

(The End)

Afterword

She said it! ♥

I know I said in the Volume 8 afterword “With so many bombshells locked and loaded, I wonder which one I’ll detonate first [evil grin],” but that was a lie. I was planning for this from the beginning, and that’s why I wrapped things up with this RPG session—the only place Chihiro was allowed to be her true self around Itsuki.

Thus, Volume 9 finally ends with Chihiro exploding. Miyako and Ashley had some new developments as well; we have a new full-on loli character in Nadeshiko, and overall I think I packed a lot in here. If you enjoyed it, I’m happy.

By the way, I just want to say there is *no* relation between Toki’s past and that of anybody in real life. Many thanks to my editor, Iwaasa, for the tremendously useful stories he told me!

Between the industry material, the nudity, the beer, the board games, and so on, this series contains pretty much everything I enjoy in a single package. The one thing it lacked was a kid, so with this volume, everything’s finally complete. The series really *is* just an extension of all my hobbies, so I doubt many readers are a fan of everything that’s appeared from Volume 1 forward. (If you are, try writing a novel. I insist.) However, it *does* look like a lot of people got into writing novels, or craft beer, or board games, or tabletop RPGs thanks to reading *Sister*, which I couldn’t be happier to see. I’ll do my best to keep on stoking your curiosity.

So as of a few weeks before I’m writing this, the anime version of *A Sister’s All You Need* has wrapped up all twelve episodes of its TV broadcast. I put everything I had into it, serving as story editor, and I’m sure I’m going to cherish it as something I love for the rest of my life.

Itsuki’s statement in the final episode, along the lines of “But it’s still fun, and that’s why I’m here,” isn’t in the original novels, but I think it’s a good way to sum up the writing aspect of this series. Not every part of it is fun—in fact, the majority of it is really hard—but in

the end, I guess that's what it all comes down to. So as long as I find it fun, I think I'll want to keep going at it.

And to the readers as well—if watching the anime to the end helped make you feel a bit more optimistic about matters, then I'd be overjoyed to hear that.

Anyway, the first of two Blu-ray box sets for the *Sister* anime comes out January 26, 2018 in Japan, with the second one coming March 23. I hope you enjoy the incredibly fun (and occasionally heart-wrenching) adventures of Itsuki and the gang.

By the way, as mentioned in the story, television media is a huge pain in the ass to work in. Words that no network had problems with three or six months ago are suddenly banned, things that are ever-so-slightly racy get subject to the most inane restrictions... It's all so incredibly common. We tried to toe the line as much as possible with the scripts and visuals for the *Sister* anime, but things I assumed would pass with no problem when I wrote them turned out to be gigantic headaches. A penis is just a body part, people!

...I'm completely satisfied with the anime itself, but to be perfectly honest, not everything about what was broadcast on TV was my original intention. I hope you'll be inspired to check out the Blu-ray version to see how things really are.

As a bonus for the twin Blu-ray box sets, each one comes with a 100 percent original drama CD written by me. In Set 1, Itsuki's sick with a cold, and Chihiro, Nayuta, Miyako, Kaiko, Ashley, Haruto's sister, Alice, Kenjiro Toki, and other members of his beautiful-girl harem come along to help him out in *The Get-Well-Soon All-Stars*. Thanks to binaural recording, it really feels like you're there—it's like some kind of far-future technology, and it's great. As you might guess from the cast, it all turns out to be a dream in the end, but it's such a powerful story, you won't even care that I just spoiled it.

For Set 2, the disc contains two stories: *The Ashley Ono Route (Digest)*, and *The Kaiko Mikuniyama Route (Digest)*. Yes, just like in a dating sim, Ashley and Kaiko go after Itsuki's love like their lives depend on it. Both characters are essentially the heroes of their own story lines in the novels, but since this is a bonus for the anime—itsself a parallel world—I figured writing something like this wouldn't be a bad thing to have. Ashley heaping attention upon Itsuki is incredibly cute, and no matter what timeline she's living in, Kaiko never stops acting insane. It was super-fun to write and record, and what's more, Jouji Nakata provides the voice for Kaiko's dad, a character who

didn't make it into the anime. You've got this incredible voice huffing panties in the midst of the story, so I hope you'll check it out.

Both stories are subtitled (*Digest*) simply because, due to time restraints, they had to be compressed a bit, but perhaps you'll see a non-digest version in audio or novel form for the Ashley and Kaiko routes. What am I saying? There absolutely won't be. Sorry. What you *will* find in the box sets are bonuses like a character-song CD, material for the *Landscape* series and *A Sister's All You Need!* that's all far higher quality than it needs to be, and so forth. Be on the lookout.

■ Q&A Corner

[Q] Will Kasuka Sekigahara make an appearance again?

[A] In the novels, that's a big TBD from me. I'd be happy to have her show up in the Q&A Corners between chapters...but I'm concerned it'd ruin any future plans. If enough people want to see her, I'll make it happen.

[Q] In the world of *A Sister's All You Need!*, what did Yomi Hirasaka do after wrapping up *Haganai*?

[A] Good question. Chances are, he either retired from writing and just goofed around in Gifu Prefecture, or maybe he's beaver away on some other series.

[Q] Do you go on as many trips as Itsuki and company do?

[A] I'm not quite as free of obligations as them, but I do like visiting Hakone and making other quick trips from greater Tokyo.

[Q] Will Miyako find happiness?

[A] I don't know how you'd define happiness, but maybe she'll look back on how she is now—lost and searching for her own way—and see that as happy times.

[Q] Are there really tax accountants with as good a rapport with their clients as Ashley?

[A] I go out to eat with *my* tax accountant quite a bit, actually, so I think they do exist. There's a decent age difference between us, but we went to the same high school, so for the most part, we just whine about how shitty it was.

[Q] What issues did you run into producing the *Sister* anime?

[A] The things I was directly involved with—screenwriting, the bonus

drama CDs, voice recording—generally went pretty smoothly, so I don't really have any sob stories to recall (the producer and editors had a harder time, but...). There were a ton of assets for me to look over and approve, which certainly kept me busy, but it also taught me how nice it is when they actually ask me to check everything, rather than slum it. I didn't see that as a pain at all.

[Q] I want an anime season two!

[A] I'm a big fan of this one line from the opening song: "There's no such thing as a dream that comes true just because you wish it." I'll need *your* strength for it.

In the "favorite character" surveys, Nayuta had been number one for nearly the entire series, except for Miyako in Volume 5. However, in Volume 8, Chihiro finally took the top spot for the first time. Generally, for the first five volumes, Nayuta, Miyako, Chihiro, Itsuki, and Kasuka were neck and neck, followed by Ashley, Haruto, Ui, and Kaizu vying for sixth place. It's not that survey results change what I write, but I always secretly look forward to reading them.

Anyway, here's hoping I see you in Volume 10 and the Blu-rays!

Yomi Hirasaka
Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist
Early January 2018

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator. Imagine! Aoba, of all people, serving as a drop-in wife of sorts. Allow me to draw her in a uniform for this page, please. I always believed she wouldn't keep that snippy tone forever, but I had no idea she had the potential to be so sweet.

There's a lot of tears in this volume's illustrations overall, but I think the plot isn't sad so much as moving at a pretty fast clip. And the impact at the end! As the illustrator, I want to produce more visuals of Chihiro as a girl, but what will the future hold there?! That's what I'm most excited about this year.



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